

僕はやっぱ
気づかない



望公太

NOZOMI KOTA

イラスト タカツキイチ

I Really Don't Notice

vol.1

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[Novel Updates](#)

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Text Right to Left:

“Even if the world changes, the humans in it won’t change. That’s why I want to protect them both.”

“Right now, I’m thankful.
Thankful they gave me the power to fight.”

“The way we’re going, humanity will be destroyed, right?”

These girls will—
— Protect the World!



「うん……。馬鹿だよ」

「そうかなあ。僕、馬鹿かな？」

「本当に……。本当に馬鹿なんだね、籠島くんは……」

“You really... you really are an idiot, Kagoshima-kun...”
“You think so? Am I an idiot?”

“Yes... you’re an idiot.”

Prologue

The world is boring.

Put a little softer, it is ordinary, and to put it softer than that, peaceful. No scary incidents or outrageous miracles; it did little more than turn its course. Contrary to finding it dull, I accepted that was the way things should be.

Back when I was a child, I dreamed of becoming an ally of justice and saving the world, but now that I was seventeen years old, I no longer even considered it. No matter how I wished for such a thing, the world wouldn't change. The world was at peace.

No matter how you pray for it, the interesting, thrilling events from the worlds of manga and anime simply don't happen. There are plenty of other things to think about. The next test, or a girl in your class, or how it's about time you stopped buying Corocoro Comics every month. They're terribly plain and trivial things, but life's made up of repeating through them.

Life isn't dramatic.

Takasugi Shinsaku once mentioned, "The mind to bring interest to an otherwise uninteresting world", but if you'll let me have my say, "An otherwise uninteresting world is also interesting".

The world is just right with this level of boredom.

That is the conclusion to the results of my, Kagoshima Akira's seventeen years of lived experience.

It's not like anything's ever going to happen.

I mean.

Witches from other worlds,
and cyber soldiers paying a visit from the future,
and psychics fighting under the instruction of research institutions
don't exist, after all.

Chapter 1: Nodding Off in the Park

“I know we’re on class committee, but hasn’t there been way too much work to do lately? Orino-san?”

A classroom run empty once classes were over, I aligned the edges of the printouts as I spoke to Orino-san sitting across with a sigh.

“Your yapping won’t lower the workload, Kagoshima-kun. Get those hands moving, why don’t you?”

“You’re a real earnest one, you know that.”

“Being earnest is a good thing. Don’t say it like it’s an insult.”

“Well sorry for that.”

Orino-san’s slight pout was so cute, I felt my mouth go lax. Orino Shiori. Black hair that draped over her shoulders; her shapely nose line led into a well-orderly face, a slender neck. Giving off an intellectual air, she was the class’ committee representative. Though I just became vice-rep through my weakness in rock-paper-scissors, she announced her own candidacy and acquired her position with tremendous support. A girl with the disposition of an elder sister.

“Maaan, I really want to go home.”

“Is there some business you have to attend to?”

“Yeah. I need to pick up on the game I bought yesterday.”

“You can’t call that business.”

“It’s bonafide business, I tell ‘ya. If I don’t do my best, the world is screwed.”

“The game world, that is.”

She did have a point. With all the grudges and salvation, and revivals and plot twists, the game world seemed unnecessarily hectic, but the real world was considerably quiet. It’s a bit of a derogation of duty. No wait, is it peaceful because everyone’s working diligently? Yeah, let’s put that on hold.

“How should I say it, it really is boring, you know.”

“... Kagoshima-kun, you use the word boring too much,” Orino-san sighed,

resting her chin on her hands. “If you keep saying negative things, you’ll grow into a dull adult.”

“I don’t think it’s that negative.”

Ignoring a fixated stare from Orino-san, I look out the window.

“I don’t hate boredom. Humans are better off with a bit of time to waste. Meaning to me, boredom isn’t something to endure, it’s something to enjoy.”

These dull days of no happenings were reassuring. Abnormalities and extraordinaries were unnecessary.

“I like a laidback day-to-day”

“Day-to-day, huh...”

A slight shadow stretched across Orino-san’s face

“... You’re right, a boring day-to-day, peace really is best.”

“That’s just how it is. Just being—”

“Hmm?”

“Ah, no. It’s nothing.”

I hurriedly held back the words I was about to leak. That was dangerous, too dangerous. There was no way I could say, “Just being able to sit back and talk to you afterschool isn’t bad either.”

Our work continued, some idle chatter mixed in. Perhaps because of our differing natures, it was saddening to see the difference in workmanship on display between the stacks of printouts I put out and the ones Orino-san did. Even when our only job was to paperclip them together.

“If only I had psychic powers or something, I’d get this done with in a flash.”

As I spoke, fed up of that busy work,

“Psychic...”

Orino-san gave a small murmur with a furrow of her brow.

“Psychic powers aren’t that convenient.”

It seems she bit onto the word psychic.

“It’s not like anyone can use them, both talent and effort are indispensable.

Just because you put in the effort, there's no guarantee your powers will grow, but if you don't put in the effort, there's no change of ever becoming strong. Psychic users are largely classified into two groups, Special and General and... which one's better really depends on the circumstance, but..."

I was taken aback as Orino-san suddenly started speaking so unreservedly.

"But... powers're really more of a hindrance than a talent. Like a bug that breaks out in an abnormal brain. That's why..."

"O-Orino-san...?"

When I hastily called her name, she raised a blank face.

"Oh, umm... Ahaha. Yep. It was all in an article I saw online, and all from a site without a lick of credibility so... ahaha."

She averted her eyes from with all her might, letting out a mighty dubious laugh.

"Thank god. I was wondering what had gotten into you."

She had put quite a bit of emotion into her voice, so it didn't feel like she was lying, but, well if she said it was so, then I'm sure that's how it was.

"I never thought you'd be interested in that occult stuff, Orino-san. It's a bit surprising."

"N-no, you're wrong about that. I just happened upon it. Got a slight glimpse yesterday. L-look, if we don't get our work done soon, the teacher's going to give it to us."

I got the feeling she had blatantly changed the topic, but it's Orino-san we're talking about here, so surely she just was just trying to finish work faster. Yep. She really is a good kid.

Just like that, we continued working around ten minutes, and around the time we had finished around eighty percent of the work requested of us, an electronic beeping sounded out. It wasn't my phone, which would mean it was Orino-san's by process of elimination.

Did she forget to set it on silent, I wondered as I glanced over—to find Orino-

san glaring at her phone screen with a startled look on her face. The sweat on her brow really gave off a sense of urgency.

“What h—”

“Sorry Kagoshima-kun!”

Orino-san forcefully stood and grasped at her own bag.

“Something came up. I have to get going now... can I leave the rest of the work to you?”

“Sure... it’s already pretty much done, so I should be fine.”

“Thanks. I really am sorry.”

Without waiting for me to say it, Orino-san fled the classroom with the speed of a startled hare.

“... Whatever.”

Despite the many questions I had, I restarted work. It wasn’t anything new, from time to time, Orino-san would suddenly vanish like that. Even in the middle of class, she might take off somewhere. While it did make me curious, I think that everyone has their own circumstance, so I didn’t intent to pry. Orino-san would say things like, “My grandmother’s in critical condition...” or “My stomach’s suddenly...” and such, so I’m sure that’s exactly how it was. She was like a hero reporting for duty when a monster appeared, but of course, there’s no way anything like that could happen.

It seems there are various types of psychic powers. Precognition, clairvoyance, telepathy, psychometry, psychokinesis, teleportation, pyrokinesis, the list goes on and on. With just a quick search on my phone, that many terms came out. I’d heard of each and every one of them in some manga or another. Generally speaking, Extra Sensory Perception is a sense of perception that goes beyond what can be gained through sensory organs. These abilities are apparently different from the power to physically move objects with the mind (Psychokinesis). But as ESP users can occasionally use PK-like powers as well, these two powers are put together under the word PSI(ψ) or something like that.

“Hmm. This is quite intriguing.”

After delivering the documents to the staff room and starting on my way home, I continued scrolling down my phone screen. I recalled my conversation with Orino-san and tried looking into it, but the matter was surprisingly deep. It seems psychic powers were a far more realistic existence than I thought. It's a proper psychological field of study, and a great many university professors have stated they 'Can't deny the possibility of Extra Sensory Perception'.

It seemed far more realistic to me than magic and time leaps. Well, in the end, it really just comes down to entertainment. It's the same thing as ghosts and morning horoscopes. Do they really exist? Will they really hit the mark?

Without considering anything uncouth, the people who enjoy it can just have their fun.

Reaching that conclusion, I closed my cell phone and hastened my feet.

There was nary a soul to be found in the evening's residential district. Nor could I hear the caw of crows. I was approaching 'Gentle Breeze Park', a place that had seen better days. Once I made it through, I'd be right at my doorstep.

There were no signs of children playing in the park, the playground equipment lonesomely played with by the wind. As I thought, children these days all shut themselves up in their rooms and play video games. For some reason, that was a sorrowful notion.

The park was where my childhood memories were made. Practicing my finishing move alone, or training to be a ninja, I did a lot of things I wanted to forget. Feeling a faint nostalgia, I hazily entered the park without any particular goal. And—

My right arm disappeared.

“... Huh?”

I could only blankly open my mouth.

I tried grabbing my right arm with my left—and ended up grasping at air. There was nothing beyond my right shoulder. An uncanny moment later, a deluge of blood spouted out. Split splat, the reddish black liquid slathered over the ground. I reflexively tried containing it with my left arm, to no effect. The pain

finally reached me.

“—!”

A shriek my words could never describe leapt free from my throat.

What could this be?

With my mind still frozen over, my knees clattered together, and I collapsed on the spot. I thought my consciousness might drift at any moment from the sharp pain.

“...?”

At the end of my sight, I could see a human hand. My right arm.

It was being trodden on by a leg with the girth of a great oak. Sprouting sharp talons, a leg covered in thick fur. When I raised my field of vision, this time I caught sight of massive claws.

It was a ridiculously large wolf, the size of a truck. Its low intimidating growl entered my ear. Its lie was a pitch-black red. From its head, a sword-like horn protruded out. And that horn was recklessly slathered in blood. It was probably mine. Apparently, that horn had severed my right arm.

“—Sharpen and sharpen, and come to my hand, a sharp red—”

I heard a voice. Young and sweet, the lisping voice of a girl. Almost as if she was chanting a spell, she lined up divine-sounding words.

“—To ash. Ash to nil. Red, red and redder still—”

Looking the direction of the voice, there was a person’s shadow above the wolf.

A white robe around her body, a girl with youthful facial features floated. Her small build was surrounded in something like an aura, her pink hair tied at both sides flickered and danced the dance of flames.

“《Salamander’s Tail》”

A blazing spear of flames manifested in her small clutch. That spear the size of a telephone pole was thrown straight at the wolf.

The spear snapped its fangs as it entered through the mouth, skewering the beast’s body whole. An ear-rending cry of agony escaped the space lefts in its

teeth. The wolf flared up, leaving no ash as it carbonized and disintegrated until it had disappeared without leaving a trace.

Relieved the battle was over, the young girl took a deep breath. Subsiding the aura emitting from her body, the girl floating through space gently landed without a sound.

In my faint consciousness, I watched the scene as if looking at a dream. The pain was gradually softening. It was a sign I would soon reach eternal sleep. The blood from my right shoulder had made a dark red carpet on the dirt. My thoughts stopped turning entirely. Oh, I wonder if I'll die—

“T-this is bad!”

Seeing me on the verge of death, the girl raised a frantic voice. Her eyes were blinking in disbelief. Retrieving my arm that had fallen where the wolf had been, she approached bit by bit. As if her stiff air to that moment had been a lie, the way she ran was like a child.

“I’ve got to hurry! I-is he okay... the only healing I’ve ever done is treating burns but... yeah. No time to make excuses.”

Mumbling this and that, the girl touched the right arm she held to my right shoulder.

“U-umm! You have to calm down and listen, okay.”

With spinning eyes, she peered into my face.

“I’m going to cast healing magic on you. It’s even harder to use magic on people of your world than it is for those from ours, but there’s nothing else I can do here. So relax your body as best as you can, lend an ear to the voice of the planet, and please try to feel that this planet is a living being!”

[INSERT PICTURE]

I only caught around half of her words, but I managed to pick up I should ‘relax my body’, so I followed orders. Rather, the power was arbitrarily draining from my body regardless.

“—Restoration to the tears of destruction. Purification to lie alongside

corruption—”

The girl closed her eyes, weaving together enigmatic words once more.

“—Bring forth that of tempestuous tranquil. White, white and whiter still—”

Gradually, my body was enveloped in something warm.

I could definitely feel it. The planet’s... pulse like something.

“《Scarlet Nostrum》”

The next instant, my body was swallowed by white flames.

As if the cells in my body were torn apart, only to start linking together again.

Tasting such a peculiar feeling of ‘healing’, I gently nodded off.

When I lifted my eyelids, the planet’s scattered night sky, and a pink-haired girl entered my eyes.

“Ah, are you awake?”

By the face before me, and the soft sensation under my head, I could tell I was being given a lap pillow.

“...”

My sense of embarrassment suddenly forced its way up, attempting to swiftly raise the upper half of my body but... it failed.

“D-don’t do that! The healing magic worked well enough, but even if your wounds were healed, it didn’t restore your stamina that was run to its very limit from the blood loss.”

My body was sluggish. I felt the sort of fatigue as if I’d sprinted full force until I collapsed.

“Umm... by healing magic, you mean...”

“...Ah.”

Crap, I went and said it, spoke the girl’s expression of regret.

“Umm, no way good sir, what do you think you’re talking about? I didn’t say anything like that.”

Scratching her head, the girl laughed an ahaha.

“Right! My right hand is...”

I tilted my head slightly to shift my vision. My right hand was... right where a right hand should be. When it was such a natural thing, it was reason to rejoice.

“... Did you reattach it?”

“Pardon? What are you talking about?”

When I asked, she blankly tilted her head.

“Umm, what was that wolf-like monster...?”

“A wolf? The Japanese Wolf went extinct ages ago.”

Strange. It wasn't adding up.

“Wait a second... then why are you giving me a lap pillow again?”

“When I was passing through the park, I found you fallen over. Out like a light, senpai. So driven on by my sense of justice, I decided I would nurse you.”

“...”

“...”

For the next few seconds, we exchanged a wordless stare. A cold sweat was flowing down the girl's face, and I imagined it was what I'd see if a person who usually didn't lie forced themselves to tell a falsehood.

“... I see. So I fell asleep, did I?”

It must be because I stayed up late playing RPGs last night. That fantasy dream I saw was also surely the game's influence.

“T-that's right! It was all a dream! Of course it was a dream.”

“As I thought. There's no way I would ever be attacked by a stupidly large wolf and be saved by a magician.”

“Exactly. How could that sort of black and red horned wolf actually exist in any realistic framework!”

“Huh? Did I say anything about the wolf's appearance?”

“Aaah! Come to think of it, isn't it about time you told me your name!?”

I got the feeling she forcefully turned the conversation aside, but that was surely my imagination. Perhaps she had just been curious about my name the whole time. She did nurse me, after all.

“Umm, I’m guessing you’re my upperclassman? I’m a freshman at Adatara high school...”

Hearing that, I took another look over the girl. The white robe she had been wearing a moment ago (though that was a dream) was gone, and she was wearing the same Adatara High School uniform as me.

... So she was a freshman? I was sure she was in middle school.

“I’m a second year, class 2-7, Kagoshima Akira.”

“Akira? What kanji do you use for Akira?”

“The same Akira from ‘to give up’(諦).”

“Hmm... how should I put it, that’s rare.”

I got the feeling she just insulted me in a roundabout way. Well, given my name, it couldn’t be helped. The name Akira should be written with of ‘Bright(明)’ or ‘Elegant(晶)’ or ‘Charming(晃)’ or ‘Cedar(彰)’ or ‘Poem(章)’... there were plenty of candidates, but of all things, it just had to be ‘give up’. I really must doubt the sense of my parents overseas (Father 65y/o Mother 35y/o, a couple with an age difference).

In elementary school, I felt of a bit of complex over it and,

‘Write out the word Emperor(帝王)—read it as Akira.’

I would say some painful things, but lately, I’ve gotten around to just normally saying, ‘It’s Akira for give up’.

“So what’re your name?”

“Kurusu Crimson Kuria. Class 1-3.”

“Hold it. So you’re... Kurusu-chan?”

I knew that name.

In April, the boys were saying something about an awfully cute half-foreign girl enrolled. I was into older girls, if I had to say, and I had more interest in the third year returnee called Kagurai who transferred in, so I didn’t care to confirm Kurisu-chan’s face.

Now that I was looking at it, I could agree.

Pink-blond hair, and a distinct non-Japanese look to her. Large and round eyes. She was just the beauty the rumors claimed her to be.

“If I recall correctly, you’re half-foreign, right? What sort of country is the foreign half from?”

“I’m a hybrid between this world and that one. Papa is Japanese, and Mama hails from the lands of Rhulein.”

“... Say what?”

“A-AAH! I made a mistake. I’m from someplace in Europe.”

“Someplace... you don’t know?”

“Errr... umm... I-I think it was America.”

“... No, I don’t think America is in Europe.”

“Erp. I’m sorry. I’m not really knowledgeable on the geography of this world, see...”

“This world?”

“AaaAAh! It’s nothing! Please forget about it!”

Tears built up in her eyes as she sullenly waved her arms. That girl must be bad at geography. Everyone has a subject they’re bad at, so it’s not good to make fun of her for it. Kurisu-chan’s hot haste was so cute, I found my mood taking a gentle turn. Just because the conversation’s a little incoherent, it doesn’t bother me.

“Now then, it’s about time I get going.”

I got the feeling I had indulged in Kurisu-chan’s lap pillow too much. When I slowly raised my body, I felt the intense fatigue from before had faded. I cricked my neck and spun my shoulders. Alright. Everything’s in working order.

“It’s gotten dark out, should I walk you home?”

“Don’t worry about that. I need to go put in a subjugation report at Rhulein temple—I mean my house is close, so it’s fine.”

“I see. That’s good.”

It was our first meeting, so it was best I didn’t act too familiar. In human relations, it’s important to keep a sense of distance.

When I declared our parting and turned to leave, “U-umm,” she called me to a stop.

“Your arm isn’t perfectly reattached yet, you should get some rest for a while...”

“Haha. Kurisu-chan. You’re talking about a dream.”

“Ahaha. That’s true, but... just in case, or should I say, just to make sure... they say your dreams can try to tell you something... and, umm, the mana is...”

With the face of someone who wanted to say something but couldn’t, muttered incoherently.

“That’s right! Umm, this is about a manga I read the other day, but according to that manga, if a person who can’t use magic is treated with it, the mana will- ah, mana is something like a planet’s lifeforce but... anyways, there’s a possibility the mana might run rampant. There’s your right arm to worry about too, I want you to refrain from and harsh exercise for the time being...”

“? Umm, you’re talking about a manga, right? Why did you bring that up all of a sudden.”

“Urgh... But, but, the contents are kinda, somewhat similar to your dream, so I want you to be careful.”

She really sounded worried. It seemed she was quite the worrier.

“You’re a kind one, you know that Kurisu-chan?” I gave a smile. “I’ve always been an indoors person, so don’t worry about it. I just bought a new game yesterday, so I’ll be having my fill of it for a while.”

“Really!? That’s great.”

Her face brightened up like a flower in bloom. She looked relieved from the bottom of her heart. While she seemed a bit out there, she was a good kid. My first impression of Kurisu-chan was something like that.

The next day morning, when I entered the classroom, Orino-san apologized to me.

“Don’t worry about it. There was barely anything left to do. But what sort of business did you have to attend to?”

When I casually asked, Orino-san made a crap I have to think of something face, and after leaving a while of silence, she hit her hands together in enlightenment.

“My grandmother became critically ill.”

“Huh? Wasn’t your grandma on her deathbed just the other day?”

“T-the other day, it was on my mother’s side! Yesterday, it was on my father’s!”

“I see. You’ve got it rough...”

I recalled my grandma and pa in the countryside. They were in good health when I went to meet them last month, but they were getting on in years, so there was no telling what might happen and when.

“... Umm, don’t make such a gloomy face.”

Orino-san spoke with a sense of guilt in her expression.

“When I went to see her, grandmother immediately got better...”

“Really? That’s wonderful, Orino-san.”

I was genuinely happy. But, “... I’ll have to stop using that one,” Orino-san muttered softly with a bitter smile on her face.

“... How should I put it, you’re too honest, Kagoshima-kun. If you don’t learn to doubt people a bit, you’re in for a load of troubles in the future.”

“It’s fine. I choose who I trust. You’re sincere and earnest, so there’s no way you’d ever lie to me. I can at least tell that much.”

“... Stop it. Stop with the innocent smile. You’re hurting my heart here...”

For some reason, Orino-san held her chest with a conflicted expression.

“Ah, come to think of it, Orino-san. Do you know Kurisu-chan?”

Recalling yesterday’s dramatic incident (albeit a dream), I tried asking.

“Do you mean the first year, Kurisu Crimson Kuria? I know her. In that ball game tournament a while back, I talked to her a few times.”

“What sort of girl is she?”

“I thought she was a friendly and good girl. When she’s got such a cute appearance, she wasn’t stuck up about it at all. She felt really nice to be around.”

Hm. So same as the impression I got.

“So what’s up? Did you hear something about Kurisu-chan?”

“No. It’s nothing.”

“Hmm,” she looked over me dubiously. “Instead of that sort of childish girl,

weren't you supposed to be into mature, older sister-types?"

"H-how could you tell?"

Her perfect aim took me by surprise.

"Remember how the boys made a ruckus back in April? Taking sides between 'half-blood beautiful freshman Kurisu' and 'Cool beauty returnee Kagurai'? I was sure you were in Kagurai-senpai's faction. Me oh my. Why do boys enjoy getting caught up in such idiocy, I wonder."

With a fed-up breath, Orino-san shrugged her shoulders. As one of those idiotic boys, I did feel cut down.

When the year started, those boy's talks truly did focus in on those two, and just as Orino-san said, I was in the Kagurai faction.

I just joined because I was told I had to pick one or the other. Granted, I can't deny I like mature elder-sister types.

"But I'm surprised you knew about that, something so trivial."

"Yeah... ah, i-it's just a coincidence, pure coincidence."

For some reason, she spoke with a rising pitch, before abruptly changing the topic.

"More importantly, we need to talk about work, that work. The teacher made another request. Said we have to collect the career surveys."

Yipee, more work. There's been a lot of that lately.

But career, eh.

Apparently, this is the year when I should start giving it some earnest thought.

"Do you have any dreams for the future?"

Taking out the collection envelope from her bag, Orino-san asked me.

"Yeeaah. If you ask me, well...nothing in particular. If I can just live on in peace without incident, that's enough for me."

"My, my," came her wry smile. "So you've got no hopes or dreams."

"Ah, but there is one dream I want to come true."

"And what's that?"

"I want to live to the year 2112, and meet Doraemon!"

“.....”

“Ah, you didn’t know? 2112 is the year Doraemon is born.”

“No, I knew that.”

“I have to do my best to make sure yellow Doraemon’s ears aren’t eaten by those mouse-shaped construction robots.”

“... I guess it’s not good enough to just have hopes and dreams.”

She told me off with a tired look and a sigh. Well, it’s not as if I was that serious about it. At best, I just thought it would be nice if I could.

“Have you always been like that, Kagoshima-kun?”

“Mnn, I wonder? There were a lot more things I wanted to do back then. Like ninja, pilot, and soccer player, and also—hero of justice, that sort of thing. But these days, there’s not much.”

“I see. So you woke up from the dream”

“I’d rather say the dreams woke me.”

When someone stops chasing their dreams, it’s not always because they experience the setbacks and despair you’d find in a manga or drama. Their interest in the dream itself can go cold. Always liking the same things, always dreaming the same dreams is harder than one would expect. But, well, if you called it change or growing up, it had a decent ring to it.

“Then what about you? What’s your dream, Orino-san?”

“Yeaah. A dream, huh...”

There, Orino-san gave just a slight self-deprecating smile.

“I want to become a normal girl, I guess?”

“That... so...? I think you’re plenty normal, and a girl to boot.”

“Fufu, why thank you.”

The bell rung, and our homeroom Hoshigawa-sensei entered the classroom, so we cut off our conversation, and returned to our seats. The teacher at the podium listed out our plans for the day. I listened in as I inched my left hand towards my right shoulder.

There was a slight, truly trivial off-sense to it.

As if an unknown power was swirling around my body.

Adatara High School has a Computer Club, usually called the ComClub. Their club room is on the top floor, a twenty-one-tatami room with a few computers left around.

(TL: Around 35 m²)

Why do I know when I'm not a member? That's because right after I enrolled, I thought I would enter the ComClub. I thought it was a club that played PC games all day so I gave it a whirl, but contrary to my expectations, they actually did some serious programing and computer customization, so I quit in no time. The spring of this year, a disturbance broke out in the club.

The rumored transfer student, the returnee of wit and beauty Kagurai-senpai entered the club.

The club's glasses initially rejoiced, but all resigned a few days later.

Just what could have happened?

No matter, when all's said and done, it meant that at present, Kagurai-senpai was the sole member of the ComClub. There's a rule somewhere stating a club needs at least five members to continue its activity, but Kagurai-senpai's way with a computer was fearsome, and because she was entrusted with management of the school's security, the ComClub's existence was accepted as a special exception.

"An empress, or maybe a Yakuza boss, well something like that..."

I whispered to myself as I climbed the stairs to the top floor. It's not like I was stalking Kagurai-senpai or anything. That level of information was pretty much common knowledge to every boy in school.

I arrived at my destination, the biology storage room. I opened the door after a knock.

"Hoshikawa-sensei, I brought the career survey forms you asked for... huh?"

The teacher wasn't there. He wasn't in the staff room, so I thought I'd find him here. Since they needed to be turned in by next week, I guess it wouldn't make a difference if I did it tomorrow. I tucked the career surveys away in my bag and I left the storage room behind me.

Walking down the corridor lit by the westering sun, I thought about Orino-san. Collecting career surveys was originally supposed to be carried out by the

both of us but, “Sorry. My stomach hurts so...” she said as she went off in a dash, so I took it up. For someone with a hurt stomach, she was considerably light on her feet. Perhaps Orino-san has a weak stomach. She must be used to it, but having so many stomach aches must be harsh. When I came down with diarrhea, I lightly tried cursing the world to death a few times. Alright, this time, I’ll give her a stomach wrap as a present. She’s a girl, so it goes without saying keeping her stomach comfortably warm is for the best.

As I thought over such things,

“—But—this time— finish you—”

“Gyahaha— hey— oka— umi?”

A bold and dignified woman’s voice, and a man’s voice that rubbed me the wrong way.

When I turned in the direction of the voice, I found myself facing the ComClub’s room.

“... How peculiar.”

Kagurai-senpai was supposed to be the only member of the ComClub. So why a man’s voice? Now hold on, could it be... he, um, uh, came for some fun? No, there’s no way when it came to that proud Kagurai-senpai. But... driven on by my curiosity, I couldn’t help but move my feet towards the ComClub’s room. I quietly placed my hand on the doorknob. It wasn’t locked. I opened it ever so slightly to peer in.

It was dark in the room. An orderly line of PCs. A single screen lit a bluish white illuminated Kagurai-senpai’s dignified countenance.

Her glossy long hair that grew to her waist. Sharp slit eyes. Tall and slender, she was a beauty of the cool variety. Personally speaking, her slender, pointed chin captivated me.

I suddenly recalled a theory that stated the human chin was gradually narrowing. Apparently, as humans started eating much softer foods compared to our ancestors, the human chin was degenerating with time, growing thinner year by year. It’s said that our descendants will definitely have far narrower chins than us.

Not that such digression had anything to do with Kagurai-senpai.

I inspected the room corner to corner, but Kagurai-senpai was the only one

there. How strange, then in that case, that man's voice was...

Separated from the questions in my head, Kagurai-senpai picked up a cellphone that was on the desk. It was fashioned with a large strap attached. Around twice the size of the cellphone itself, it was shaped like a brown teddy bear. While I was a bit surprised that Kagurai-senpai used such an adorable strap, the gap moe got to me a bit.

With a slender cable, she connected the phone to her computer. She closed her eyes once, and slowly opened them. The pupils her eyelids opened up to held a sublime hue.

“Dive In B3 World! Code KAGURAI Access!”

After shouting that out, Kagurai-senpai's head flopped down. Both her hands limply fell to the sides of her chair. In a posture of exhaustion, she stopped moving entirely; as if her consciousness had flown off somewhere.

“...!”

I reflexively opened the door and ran in.

“K-Kagura-senpai! Are you alright? Kagurai-senpai!?”

I loudly cried her name and shook her body a few times, but there was no response.

What should I do? To suddenly lose consciousness like that, does she have some sort of illness? I think there's a neurological disorder called narcolepsy where you fall asleep regardless of time or place, but could it be senpai has...

“A-anyways, I need to hurry and get her to the infirmary...”

I forcefully lifted Kagurai-senpai from her chair onto my back. My hands did brush against her, and I did feel the sensation of her breasts on my back, but now wasn't the time or place to rejoice over such things.

“Ah, that's right, her phone...”

Perhaps there was some line to contact if her symptoms came out, or a doctor's number to call in it. I was definitely better off taking it along.

I picked up the phone and—disconnected it from the cable.

“... Huh!?”

The next instant, a voice came from my back.

“W-what’s this!? Why was my line forcefully severed!?”

“Senpai! Are you awake!?”

“Whoah! W-who are you, and what are you doing!? Why are you carrying me!?”

“Ah, wait, stop struggling...”

Paying no heed to my advice, Kagurai-senpai continued flailing about, and because of that, I ended up taking a grand fall.

“Oww... a-ah!”

Rubbing her bottom from over her skirt, she pointed at my hands and cried out.

“Y-you, so you removed my phone terminal from the computer...”

Her shoulders were shaking. It did seem she was angry.

“Umm, was I not supposed to?”

“Of course not! What sort of idiot disconnects a terminal while it’s linked up!? Another second, and I’d have been unable to return to the real world!”

I didn’t really get it, but the common phrase, ‘Saving, please do not remove the memory card or turn off your system’ floated in my head.

“You let the buggles I’d finally cornered down get away! How do you plan on taking responsibility for this!?”

“S-sorry.”

Ovpowered by her rapidly encroaching angry look, I ended up apologizing.

“If sorry solved our problems, we wouldn’t need space-time law!”

Ah, goddammit, she held her head making a face as if to stay, one more step, and I’d have been able to defeat my old foe, but some civilian rushed in and got in the way.

“Umm, so you’re not ill, senpai? Not narcoleptic or...”

“Don’t mock me! If I wasn’t in perfect health, I’d never pass the agent selection

exam to be sent to this era in the first place!”

“Then why did you lose consciousness back there?”

“I was linked to B3 World, so of course my physical body would lose consciousness!”

Much of what she was saying sounded incomprehensible, but I pat my chest in relief.

“I see, so you’re not sick. That’s good...”

Seriously. It’s always good to be in good health.

“Wha...”

There, Kagurai-senpai frantically covered her mouth and awkwardly scratched her head.

“Umm, I’m sorry. I may have said a bit too much. It’s not like you had any ill intent.”

“No, that’s fine. But what was all that about? B3 World and being sent to this area and such?”

When I honestly asked the questions on my mind, Kagurai-senpai’s face was filled with regret in no time. Her rage had caused her to run her mouth where it shouldn’t, that sort of face.

“U-um. W-well, about that...”

Her line of sight blatantly began to swim around the room. Aha, I’ve got it.

“You were half-asleep, weren’t you.”

“T-that’s right! I was half asleep. No, I really am sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. Everyone says crazy things when they’re half asleep.”

Just yesterday, I had caused Kurisu-chan some trouble when I dozed off in the park.

“Senpai, you’re a bit of a scatterbrain, aren’t you.”

“Erk... p-pretty much.”

It was the first time we spoke face to face, but Kagurai-senpai was far easier to talk to than I had imagined. Behind her cool appearance, perhaps she held a personality that was surprisingly intimate.

“Ah, that’s right.”

After borrowing a hand to stand, I decided I’d try asking. It was something I always wanted to ask if we ever got the opportunity to talk.

“Kagurai-senpai, your first na—urgh!”

An impact to my solar plexus. Kagurai-senpai had thrust in her fist.

“... Do you really find my name that funny? Have a good laugh? How about it?”

“N... no, I was just curious...”

My back bent over, I held my stomach as I recalled Kagurai-senpai’s full name. Kagurai Monyumi.

... It was Monyumi.

While she became famous in school from her beauty, I thought it was also because of her considerably peculiar name.

I mean Monyumi is just... you know? Personally speaking, it’s all about that gap moe, but...

“God! What’s with this blasted era!”

Kagurai-senpai landed a punch in the wall.

“In my time, there were three Monyumi’s just in my grade, what’s so strange about it... when I was always saying, ‘My name’s real plain and boring, isn’t it’ as a kid, to think I’d get a taste of the complete opposite trauma in this year... dammit.”

Ruffling her long hair into a mess, she stamped on the ground. It seems she had gone through quite some trouble over her novel name. Well, it’s Monyumi, after all.

When I’d finally recovered from the damage, I tried to open my mouth, and at that moment,

“Gyahahaha! That’s why I told you to change your registered name!”

I heard the sound of belittling laughter.

It was the same voice I heard before entering the room. But there was no one

around.

“Before you set off, old Gakuta-sama over here properly warned you ‘That name of yours is reaaally strange in the era you’re going, so you’re better of changing it’ right? But you just had to go, ‘No matter what era I’m in, I’m still me’ and act all cool. You reap what you sow.”

The voice seemed to be coming from what was supposed to be a phone strap, that brown-colored bear.

“And when you put on airs all you wanted, a little teasing was all it took to get you all hot and bothered. Gyahahaha! You sure you’re not surprisingly sentimental?”

“S-stupid! Stop talking, Gakuta!”

Kagurai-senpai swiftly suppressed the stuffed animal’s mouth. But, well, I did think she was completely too late.

“A... a stuffed animal just talked...”

I stood in shock.

But, “Y-you’re wrong,” Kagurai-senpai shook her head.

“This is... umm... r-right. That’s right! It’s ventriloquism!”

“Hey now, Monyumi. No matter how you look at it, don’t you think you’re pushing it?”

“Shut it, Gakuta! I’m begging you, just play along.”

In muffled, quiet voices, Kahurai-senpai started getting her story straight with the bear.

“Just let the cat out of the bag. It’s not like revealing it to one civilian brat is going to effect your mission, right?”

“It will. We can’t leak any information to anyone from this era. Even if it isn’t related to the incident, I’ll be guaranteed a pay-cut...”

“Your wages going down is hardly a problem for your little AI pet.”

“Geh... you coldhearted bastard.”

“Gyahahaha! And I’m telling ya, there’s a right way to ask someone for a favor, you know. So how ‘bout it?”

“... Fine. I’ll buy you the game from this era you wanted.”

“Whoohoo! Glad you’re quick on the uptake. Retro games are my speciality.”

It seemed the meetup was finally over and Kagurai-senpai turned towards me.

“Hey there. My name is Gakuta. Pleasure to meet you.”

Stuffed animal Gakuta-kun’s speech suddenly went all polite. Kagurai-senpai was purposefully moving his mouth up and down.

“... Umm. Kagurai-senpai...”

I put my hand to my face and took in a deep breath. Kagurai-senpai’s face was still, a large volume of sweat was building on her brow.

After leaving ample time, I spoke.

“You’re ridiculously good at this!”

Amazing. I was moved beyond belief. She was definitely better than anyone I’d ever seen on TV. Just how did she manage to make the voice sound like such a different person? Without moving her lips a single millimeter?

“I-I-I-I know right? Ahaha.”

She raised a dry laugh, as if she’d managed to play something off. Her eyes fled to the ceiling. I got the feeling I’d been hearing those “Ahaha” laughs in excess as of late.

“It really is amazing. So this guy’s called Gakuta-kun? That’s really cute.”

When I reached out my hand, Gakuta-kun slapped it away.

“Hey kid. Hands stay off, capiche?”

It came in a threatening, Yakuza-esque voice. I was hit with the soft hand of a stuffed animal, so I didn’t suffer any physical damage, but the mental wounds ran deep.

“... Ah. Sorry, senpai. I got in over my head.”

I naturally apologized to Kagurai-senpai.

“Ah, you’re wrong. That one wasn’t me?”

“What? But you’re the one talking, aren’t you?”

“Y-yeah! That’s right. I said it...”

Kagurai-senpai held her head and writhed around. It was an interesting gesture to watch. In a good sense, the image I had of her had shattered. She was more sociable than I thought, and far more abundant in expression. She even had a hobby as interesting as ventriloquism. As I thought over such things and gazed at Kagurai-senpai, a sharp voice came from the side.

“Now, now, kid. Don’t be looking at my Monyumi with those pervy eyes.”

“I’m sorry, Kagurai-senpai! That wasn’t my intention, but...”

“No, that one wasn’t me, Gakuta just...”

“What? But you’re the one who said it, right?”

“Yes, I totally said it. I totally said it, but...!”

“I get it, you’re wondering about Monyumi’s assets, are you? Aren’t you, young man? Then get a load of this. It’s 85, 56, 77 top to bottom. At one seventy three, she’s got the slender build of a model.”

“H-hold it right there, Kagurai-senpai! Aren’t you being a bit too hospitable!?”

“Nooo! Wrong, wrong, wrong! I don’t use the word assets in such an indecent way, and there’s no way I’d brag about my three sizes to a boy I’m meeting for the first time!”

“What? But you’re the one who said it, right?”

“I don’t want this anymore—!”

Kagurai-san screamed, opening a bag on the table and saying, “You’re going in the bag, Gakuto” before closing the fastener. From her pink lips leaked a sigh as heavy as lead. She seemed to be mentally worn out.

“Anyways, what’s your name?”

“I’m Kagoshima Akira.”

“Akira? What kanji do you use for that?”

“Akira from ‘give up’.”

“What’s with that? That’s an unpleasant name.”

Unlike with Kurisu-chan, she just said it straight-up. I was used to it, so I didn’t really mind.

“But your Monyumi is—”

“Did you say something?”

“... Nothing at all.”

That’s what I thought, she nodded her head in satisfaction. That was seriously scary. Her eyes just now.

“Mnn. So, um, moving on, Kagoshima...”

After clearing her throat once, Kagurai-senpai spoke with a hesitant tone. Her face tinged red, she locked her hands behind her back, fidgeting ever so slightly.

“I-if it’s alright with you, could you tell me your email?”

“..... Come again?”

“I’m telling you I want to know your email address!”

W-was I dreaming?

The aspiration of the boys of Adatara High School, Kagurai Monyumi was asking me for my email... if I could use the opportunity to get along better with her... but it would be rude to ask for her address all of a sudden, I had been thinking.

“Why do you want my...”

“Because I am henceforth legally obligated to keep surveillance on you. As long as I know your email address, I can go through the B3 World to—ah, not that. Umm... right, I just personally wanted to get along with you.”

“You personally want to get along with me!?”

What joyous words.

Only those words reverberated through my ears.

“With pleasure, just take it, Kagurai-senpai.”

“I see. Thanks for that.”

In order to do an infrared data transfer, she opened her bag,

“Gyahahaha! Hey settle down, brat. What are you grinning for!?”

Using Gakuta-kun she started her ventriloquism again.

She must really like that ventriloquism.

Chapter 2: The Newest CG is Incredible

It's said that a man may only be popular three times in his life. If that tall tale is true, then one of those three times must be happening at this very moment in my second year of high school.

"Kagoshima-senpai~."

Lunch break the next day, Kurisu-chan paid a visit to my classroom.

"How's your arm holding up? I'm not too good with healing, so I'm worried that..... Eh? That was just a dream? Ahaha. You're quite right about that, but please do be careful. Ah, I weaved a misanga bracelet for you, but if you want, please put it on. A-ah, not like that! Please put it on your right arm, not your left... yes. You have a point. You're free to choose whichever side you put it on, but... I'll be very happy if you put it on your right. That misanga is imbued with my magic, so once your wound's fully treated, it'll break off on its own—indeed! I am definitely talking about a manga."

So anyways, just like that, she gave me a red misanga. A geometric magic-circle-like formation was depicted on it, and it boasted exquisite craftsmanship. I was honestly overjoyed with Kurisu-chan's kindness, but I'd prefer it if she chose the right location. If she did something like that at the entrance of the classroom, I'd be killed by the folks in class.

And on lunch break the next day,

"Is there a guy called Kagoshima here?"

Kagurai-senpai paid a visit.

"There's a game Gakuta demanded I go buy... ah, wrong, that's wrong. There's this game I want to buy for my little brother, so could you go out with me sometime? I'm not very knowledgeable about this era's... I mean, the newest games, see. I can't really talk with Gakuta when I'm outside. Yes, that's right. You think I can just break into ventriloquism in the middle of the street? Tes, that's why it'll be a huge help if you could teach me a few things."

So as you can see, in short, she invited me out for a date.

The class boys branded me with the mark of the traitor.

Why do the good looking girls never notice they're drawing attention to those around them? Whatever the case, with this and that, the world was boring. Being acquainted with a beautiful senior, and a cute freshman wasn't anything great enough to shake the world, but in world of boredom, you could say it was a sufficient impact.

After class one day.

Orino-san and I held a study session in the school library. Even if I call it that, I was just one-sidedly having her teach me. After both being appointed class reps in April, we got to know each other well enough, so I begged her.

Orino-san was the wielder of high-ranking intellect in the grade. Despite her many tardies and early departures, I think she could keep her position as class rep through her wonderful grades and compassionate personality.

"To calculate the surface area between a line and an arc, you use the curvature of the arc and..." Rapidly racing out notes with her pink mechanical pencil, she continued on in round letters. "And that's how you get this."

"Oh, I see."

Orino-san's teachings were concise and easy to understand. Perhaps she was better at teaching than the school's actual teachers.

"But Orino-san, you're calculating things way too fast. Just using your fingers and head, do you have some sort of trick to it?"

"I've undergone training to increase my mental operating capabilities, so to be blunt, working out problems on this level is child's play—I mean, nothing of the sort! Umm... I did abacas a lot when I was young, so I'm good at mental arithmetic!"

"Abacus, eh. I should've picked it up. Once upon a time, my mother suggested it, but it was a pain, and I stopped going."

"I-I see. Ahaha."

We held a pleasant chat as we continued our studies. Eventually, the topic of conversation turned to those two.

"Kagoshima-kun, you've become quite popular lately."

Said Orino-san, lightly puffing up her cheeks.

“It just sorta happened.”

“What do you mean by just happened? Just what sort of technique did you use?”

“You’re making me sound like the bad guy. It really did just happen. We coincidentally started getting along.”

“Hmm. I wonder if there’s something up with those two...?” she dubiously narrowed her eyes before letting out a breath of resignation. “Well, whatever. Beauties and secrets go hand in hand.”

“Does that mean you’re hiding something too, Orino-san?”

I tried saying something snobbish, expecting a cutesy response like, “Oh you, I’m not that pretty,” or, “You won’t get anywhere, flattering me,” but instead,

“Whoaah! Ah, I... I-I’m not hiding anything!”

She was extremely flustered.

What she looked like she was clearly hiding something, since she said she wasn’t, I guess she really wasn’t.

“... Ah.”

Orino-san suddenly raised her voice. She reacted as if the phone in her pocket set to silent had begun to vibrate. And in the shadow of the desk so I couldn’t see it from my position, she moved her hands as if opening it up to check.

“I-I’m sorry. My stomach just started hurting a bit... so can I go?”

She made the grim look of someone who received a message saying ‘get here ASAP’ from their superior. Her stomach must be in excruciating pain.

“Yeah, got it. Then you’d better get to the bathroom quickly.”

“Wha! I-I’m not going to the bathroom!”

“Huh? But doesn’t your stomach hurt?”

“... That’s right.”

“I’m not a kid who dreams that girls don’t have to use the restroom, so don’t worry about it. It’s a physiological phenomenon. You don’t have to be embarrassed.”

“I really don’t have to use the restroom!”

“Oh? Are you constipated?”

“Wrong! I eat well and go just fine! Just this morning—ah, what are you making me talk about...”

Orino-san held her head in self-loathing.

“Anyways. Um, I think it’ll take a while, so go home without me.”

“A while? So it hurts that bad... do you want me to take you to the infirmary?”

“... Your kindness, it hurts me.”

I really am fine, she said as she left with swift feet.

“... Was she about to leak?”

I hesitated a while over whether I should continue studying or not, but eventually decided to put away the notebooks and textbooks spread out over the table.

I’ll go home and continue my game or so. Level grinding had become a real chore, but since I bought it, I might as well play it to the end. I stood from my seat.

“... Hm?”

Next to the chair Orino-san had been sitting in, what looked like a telephone card had fallen. I picked it up and inspected it.

‘World Unified Parahuman Research Facility
Specimen Number—00275
Type—Special Rank—B
Orino Shiori’

The jet-black card spelled it out in white. Like a license, a portrait photo was included, and on it was Orino-san making a serious face.

It would be bad if she lost something important, so I’d better return it to her soon, I thought. I called her a few times, but perhaps her battery had run out, as it wouldn’t connect. Even if I wanted to deliver it to her, I didn’t know her address.

There’s no helping it, I’ll do it tomorrow.

I gave up with dignity, walking the path home alone as I always did. At the crosswalk before the residential district, all of a sudden, my right arm grew hot.

On close inspection, the misanga at my wrist was emitting a slight glow. As if responding in kind to someone's magic.

"Ah, what's this? Must be because of the sunset."

That went without saying. The white letters caught the light at an angle, causing it to look like it was glowing. The heat in my right arm was also muscle pains or something.

"..."

But I somewhat got into the mood for a detour. As if led by an unseeable something.

What I arrived at—as if pulled along on a thread—was a middle school, outside the city, shut down before I was born. A schoolhouse of rotten wood, and a schoolyard overgrown with weeds. The place was set to be demolished next month. A structure of the past.

"... What did I come here to do, I wonder."

I muttered as I placed a hand on the rusted iron school gate.
and there,

"—To he unforgiven, grant hellfire eternal. Blacker, black, and blacker still—"

A young, lisping aria I had heard before.
But when I heard it was in a dream.

"《Fallen Angel's Prayer》"

The wind suddenly picked up, the school gate began to clatter. I instinctively guarded my body with my arms. It was too strong to be a sudden gust from the mountains, and its temperature was rising. I could feel a sinister power from beyond the gate, the skin all over my body was astir.
After waiting for the atmosphere to calm down, I opened the gate and entered.

Inside the schoolyard was Kurisu-chan, a white robe over her body. But as if she had just overcome a great battle, she was raising and lowering her shoulders in breath.

“Kurusu... chan?”

When I called out, her small shoulders twitched as she timidly, timidly turned around.

“Kago... shima... senpai... why, why are you here...?”

A mix of surprise and sorrow spread across her young face. And her eyes moved towards my right arm. “... Ah...” she let out an understanding, but resigned voice.

“... I see. The spell I just chanted, and the spell in that magic band reacted to one another... well I’ll be. I only just learned 《Fallen Angel’s Prayer》, so... my hands were full with controlling it, and I had completely forgotten about Kagoshima-senpai...”

Ahaha... Kurisu-chan gave a powerless laugh.

“You saw all of that, didn’t you??”

“... Yeah, I’m sorry. I saw everything.”

Giving some consecutive nods, I slowly started walking. Kurisu-chan tensed her lips, cowering like a small animal. There was no helping it. When she was witnessed in such a state.

“I know exactly what you were doing.”

All the pieces finally fell into place. The strange bits here and there in her story, and the happenings within my dream.

“You were practicing the finishing move from your manga, right?”

“... Excuse me?”

“No, you don’t have to play dumb. I understand. You’re in an abandoned school building, crying out as loud as you can, right? I get where you’re coming from, those feelings. When I was a kid, I would practice the Kamehameha with all my might.”

Right. I knew everything. Surely Kurisu-chan was a considerable manga otaku. To the extent where her magic jargon would slip its way into the midst of normal conversation, meaning a so-called cringefest...

“Um...?”

“Ah, you don’t have to give excuses. It’s not like you’re doing anything wrong, you can hold your head up with confidence. You left town, and came all the way to a place like this so you wouldn’t bother anyone.”

For a moment, the image of a compassionate hero who ran far from town to contain civilian casualties while subjugating monsters crossed my mind, but that had absolutely nothing to do with the current situation.

“Err... so you didn’t see, Kagoshima-senpai?”

“See what?”

“That bear-like monster I was just fighting.”

“I see, so that’s the setting you’re going with.”

She’s really into it. I’m impressed.

“Wait a second... um, when did you spot me?”

“Right after I heard you cry out the name of your finishing move. 《Fallen Angel’s Prayer》, was it? After that, a hot wind blew, and then I saw you standing in the center of the schoolyard.”

“Meaning... he didn’t... see?”

Thank the heavens, she muttered, as she plopped her bottom down on the ground.

What was I not supposed to see?

I got an ample eyeful of Kurisu-chan’s cringe compilation.

“That robe you’re wearing is also that, right? That cosplay thing.”

“C-cosplay!?”

Kurisu-chan opened her eyes wide.

“Kagoshima-senpai, there are some things you just don’t say! This is a robe I inherited from mama, it’s been passed down in our family for generations, and you call it cosplay!? It boasts a massive defense against both magic and physical attacks, and you could buy yourself a small village with what it’s worth!”

“So it’s not cosplay?”

“I-I-It’s cosplay... yes, of course it’s cosplay. I bought the cloth and snipped it here and there to make it.”

“Hmm, so you made it yourself. You’re not half bad. Like those complicated

seams over here...”

I said as I reached my hand towards the robe.

“Y-you can’t! Please don’t touch it!”

She hit away my hand with all her might.

My god, Kurisu-chan hit my hand.

What should I do... it’s seriously depressing. The other day, Kagurai-senpai used Gakuta-kun to brush me away, but when it came to Kurisu-chan, it was a different story.

To think such a nice-looking girl would hit my hand away, I must be...

“... I’m really sorry. I’ll be... careful next time...”

“T-that’s not it! Don’t apologize with a face as if everything you knew was a lie! This robe is meant for battle, so its embedded with a sequence that rejects the touch of anyone apart from me. If a person with no resistance to magic touches it, they’ll be severely injured.”

“... Oh.”

“Aah! Please stop cringing when you look at me! I’m telling the truth. I stated it out of concern for you! It’s all true, I’m telling you!”

“Eh? It’s all true?”

“..... I’m sorry. I lied. I am a deluded cringefest. An eighth grade syndrome setting-obsessed creepy girl who needs to wake up and smell the roses...”

“You don’t have to deride yourself that much... you’re not bothering anyone, so it doesn’t matter if you’re embarrassing.”

“... A-ahaha. That’s right... It’s fine if I’m embarrassing, right.”

Her cheeks stiffly twitching, Kurisu-chan gave a lighthearted laugh. The fact it looked like there were tears in the corners of her eyes was probably my mind playing tricks on me.

But lately, whenever I talk to girls, by the end of it, I get the feeling they get pushed into desperation more often than not.

Yeah. Are my conversation skills lacking?

A schoolyard lit by twilight. At a bench in the corner, I sat beside Kurisu-chan.

“Huh? What happened to your robe?”

“It’s in this gem— I mean, I put it away in my bag.”

“When did that happen?”

“I’m fast at changing.”

We held such an exchange, and Kurisu-chan was in her uniform.

“Hey, Kurisu-chan,” I tried asking. “What’s the title of that manga you like so much?”

“U-umm, well...”

Her eyes darted up and to the right, as she took a pose as if to think up something on the spot.

“It’s called ‘Kuriah’s Grand Adventure’.”

Right after muttering that, she covered her face with both hands, as if to say now that one was going too far, in reproach for her own lack of naming sense.

“I don’t think I’ve heard of that one. Could it be an old work?”

“T-that’s right. You’ll never be able to get it in this day and age, you hear me? You’ll never find it anywhere. No matter what you do, don’t even think about reading it.”

That was a shame. If it was a manga Kurisu-chan loved to such a degree, I wanted to give it a read by all means.

“But you have a copy, right? Would it be possible for me to borrow it?”

“T-that’s... I pawned it at a used bookstore the other day...”

“That easily!?”

I was shocked. She liked it enough to cosplay, so what did she think she was doing.

“If it’s so rare, then doesn’t that mean you’ll never be able to get it back...?”

“Don’t worry. Kuriah’s Grand Adventure will always remain in my heart.”

“But Kuriah’s Grand Adventure, huh... come to think of it, it’s got the same name as you. Is that what led you to like it so much?”

“... Well, something like that.”

“Hmm, then,”

I asked.

“Since I can’t read it, can you tell me what that manga’s about?”

A breeze came in from the mountain, swaying the weeds lit up by the twilight. After taking a light breath, Kurisu-chan gazed out into the madder sky. She smiled. Her youthful facial features looked just a little more mature.

“It’s the story of a girl who goes to the next world to chase a villain who ran away.”

According to the story, next to this world was another one where magic existed as simple fact. The main character was a girl skilled in fire magic, and that girl was dispatched to another world as part of her job.

“The greatest country on the eastern coast of the Claire Continent, its name is Lughstoria. In the imperial capital of Rhulein, the protagonist lives with her mama and papa. Mama had always lived in the world of magic, but Papa was a man who came from a world without magic.”

“So the protagonist is a half-blood too.”

And with that name, the protagonist shared a lot in common with Kurisu-chan.

“Mama was a competent witch in Rhulein. In the combat force under the king’s direct command, she had combat prowess that would rank her either first or second, but ‘It’s not my style to be tied up by authority’ she would say as she got by running something like a store. I heard she met papa in the middle of an accident.”

Speaking brightly, Kurisu-chan’s expression was serious as if she was talking about herself.

“And then a certain incident occurred. It was quite complicated, but it was the sort of large incident where she had to go all over the country... if you want me to give a broad explanation, Mama did this and that and ended some evil organization.”

“Now that is broad...”

What sounded like a battle with the country’s existence on the line was summed up with ‘this and that’.

“And wait, so mama went and ended them? Then the story’s over. Where’s the main character’s turn?”

“It’s coming, it’s coming. The remnants of the organization the protagonist’s mother did away with went and fled to this world.”

“My oh my, this mama’s shoddy with her work.”

“I have no excuse... it seems she said something cool like, ‘Hey, as long as you’re alive, you can start over as many times as you need to’ and didn’t land the finishing blow. So the bad guys just normally ran away...”

What a cool mama. And what a hopeless villain. Was it a work with a deep and dark theme of once a failure, always a failure?

“And there, I, her daughter... I mean the protagonist went out to settle her parent’s problem.”

“Hmm, that’s a good spirit.”

“Well if you say so.”

“Not you.”

It was like the promised play of straight man and jokester. I was surprised to see Kurisu-chan playing the comic relief.

“So now, the main character has to defeat monsters summoned using the lifeforms of this world as a catalyst.”

“I see. I get the general gist.”

“Umm, so what do you think of it?”

Kurisu-chan timidly peered up at me. Staring into her moist eyes, I grew a little nervous.

“Was it... interesting?”

Her voice was tense. She held her breath as she waited for my answer. I waited a bit before honestly stating what was on my mind.

“Cliché and boring.”

“...!”

Kapow. An immense shock ran through Kurisu-chan. I could almost see a black background with lightning running across it. As if I had denied the world she lived in to its entirety.

“... What do you mean by cliché... it’s not a rip-off or anything... and wait, you’ve got a whole genre called fantasy that’s a blatant rip off of our world...”

She mumbled complaints as she started drawing a spiral beside her. Yeah, maybe I was too forward. Okay, for now, let's follow through.

"Oh, but mainstream fantasies are fine from time to time."

"I-I know right?"

Her face abruptly glimmered like the sun. What should I do? This girl was way too simple.

"It's nice that the protagonist is female. She sounds like a good girl, and I think I'd like reading about her."

"Oh senpai. What are you saying all of a sudden, you sly dog."

"Not you."

Then came the promised laughter. Perhaps Chris-chan loved laughing more than I thought.

"Ah, could it be the design on this misanga is also from that manga?"

"Yes. At present, your right arm is being sustained by my magic. You can't tell by looking, and I don't think you'll get any symptoms, but it's still being treated. That 'magic band' is there to absorb my magic and prevent it from entering any other part of your body, so you definitely can't take it off... there was an episode like that in the manga, so I couldn't help but... yeah."

So it was designed based on the manga after all.

How should I put it, it suddenly started feeling a bit embarrassing to wear. Since she went out of her way to make it, I wasn't taking it off, but...

"I feel bad to keep receiving things from you, I have to do something in return. Kurisu-chan, is there anything you want me to do?"

"Eeh? You don't have to do that... when you boil it down, that was my fault for failing to check that there was no one around."

"Don't be like that. I'm saying I want to do something in return."

For some reason, I got the feeling I held an immense debt towards Kurisu-chan.

A 'you saved my life' class momentous debt.

"... Then can you teach me geography?"

Geography? I parroted back and, yes... she bashfully nodded.

Come to think of it, Kurisu-chan was bad at geography.

“That world has something similar to math and science, and Japanese and English are... umm, I’m a bit of a cheater, but to make matters fast, let’s just say there’s a magic out there that works like a ‘babel fish’... In history, I can draw parallels between this one and that one, so that’s fine. I’m just no good at this world’s geography ... the places here get all mixed up with the other ones...”

“Kurisu-chan. It’s good to be able to say what you’re bad at, but I’m not so sure about blaming it all on manga.”

When I said it strongly as a warning, “I-I’m sorry...” she sounded a little dissatisfied as she apologized. I wonder why. I was sure I said the right thing, and yet it felt like I was making a grand misunderstanding.

“But sure. If you’re fine with me, I’ll teach you.”

I couldn’t call geography my strong point, but I knew my way around. I’m sure I could teach most of last year’s material.

“Thank you. That’s a huge load off my shoulders!”

Kurisu-chan smiled out of genuine joy. Each of her expressions and gestures warmed my heart to watch. Rather than liking her as a member of the opposite gender, I felt like I’d want a little sister like her. The sky was finally growing dark, and thinking it was about time to leave, I stood from the bench.

“Huh? Kagoshima-senpai, you dropped something.”

What Kurisu-chan held up was Orino-san’s card.

“Ah, this is Orino-senpai’s. Why do you have it?”

“I picked it up. Ah, come to think of it, you’re friends with Orino-san too. In that case, do you know anything about that card?”

“Not in the slightest. What’s this about a facility and test subject number...”

“That’s a shame. I want to get it to her quick, but it looks like Orino-san’s cellphone is dead right now.”

Is that so... she muttered, and after hesitating a while she gave a nod. Picking up a fallen wooden rod, she began drawing something on the ground. Her drawing took on the shape of a magic circle-like design of circles and stars. In the very center, she placed Orino-san’s card.

“What are you doing, Kurisu-chan?”

“Umm... I-I’m doodling!”

“... Why now?”

“Aah! Kagoshima-senpai! Over there! It’s a beautiful babe in a swimsuit!”

“Say what!?”

Faster than the speed of sound, I turned in the direction she pointed.

Where, where is she. Where’s the babe in bikini!?

From behind, “Someone who actually fell for something so by the books is calling me cliché...” I heard a fed-up voice, and felt a light as if someone was using a search magic, but now was not the time to care about something like that. Where’s the girl in a swimsuit!

I focused my eyes to the very limit as I looked around, but I couldn’t spot a single soul.

“Dammit, in that case... hup!”

To see just a little further than before, I jumped up onto the bench I had just been sitting on. But as expected of an old bench. Receiving the impact of the jump, it raised a grating shriek. I felt a terrible premonition—but not affording me the time to escape, the bench split right in two.

“Ugyaah!”

I hit the ground back-first. I received considerable damage.

“... What are you doing on your own, Kagoshima-senpai?”

As I lay belly-up, Kurisu-chan peered down at me. No, perhaps she was looking down on me. Her pupils were filled to the brim with pity.

“Umm... when you’re trying so hard, I really must apologize, but it does seem the woman in a swimsuit was just my eyes playing tricks on me. I’m sorry.”

“... What’s with that.”

Unable to hide my disappointment, I unsteadily stood to my feet.

Maaan. My back hurt, I broke a bench, and there was no babe. When it rains, it pours.

Err rather, breaking the bench was definitely bad. Even if the place was set to be demolished next month, it was still public property, for argument’s sake.

As I began planning how I would cover up a broken bench, Kurisu-chan handed back the card.

“To atone for my mistake, let me tell you where Orino-senpai is.”

I raced my bike down the unpaved mountain path. The curtain of night had fully come down, the rustling sound of the black forest lending an eerie atmosphere.

“... Is Orino-san really in a place like this?”

The place Kurisu-chan indicated was halfway up a mountain on the edge of town. It was a bit of a distance by foot, so I returned to my house to take out my bike. By the way, Kurisu-chan helped out, and we somehow managed to put the bench I broke back together. It was fine with the both of us sitting on it, so as long as it wasn't treated to roughly, there shouldn't be a problem.

Even setting the gear to the lowest setting, the mountain path was harsh.

If Kurisu-chan's wrong about this, I'm going to hold a grudge.

I peddled hard enough my thighs screamed out, finally riding out into an opening. I could see an old factory. From the ten-odd abandoned cars littered around, I could tell it was a decommissioned automobile factory.

In that space surrounded by mountain on all four sides, naturally, signs of human presence were... there.

I could feel a vague presence.

I wonder what it was, that uncanny sensation.

Stepping down from my bicycle, after mulling a few moments over whether I should go on or turn back, I chose to move forward. Pushed on by my curiosity, I made for the factory. One step, another, I put my best foot forward—

The factory exploded.

“Eh?”

The explosion rattled my eardrums. A grand uproar spread through the forest trees.

“W-whoah—!”

The blast wind hit me head on. My body floated around thirty centimeters off

the ground, before depositing me hard on my bottom. Thin roof and glass shards danced through the air, falling around me on the ground. In the factory where only the fortified steel frame remained, a brilliant flame blazed to light up the nearby forest.

“Go to heeeeeell!”

A few tens of meters ahead, a person came flying alongside their scream. Calling it a landing would be an understatement, they collided with the ground. But that human figure stood as if nothing had happened.

It was a woman in peculiar clothing.

Stuck fast to her body, it took on a shape similar to a rider suit. Her left hand was furnished with some mechanical part. Her upper arm looked bare, giving off an impression that she had bought matching gloves with a sleeveless jumpsuit.

“To be caught in a dust explosion... those blasted terrorists really thought this one through.”

She muttered in a husky voice and clicked her tongue. Her hair was brown and cut short. She wore glasses, and the eyes behind them were sharp as a knife. Aged likely somewhere in the early twenties, her body was toned, but not to the point I would call it muscular. Owing to the clothes she was wearing, I could clearly make out the lines of her body.

“Orinooo—!”

“Yes!”

Hearing the woman cry out, a response came from above. It was a voice I was familiar with. Immediately after, a woman in a similar suit landed beside the glasses woman. While I didn’t want to believe it, I focused my eyes.

“... As I thought.”

It was Orino-san. She was a bit far, but I could tell. On her face lit by the flames, was a seriousness that made it hard to compare her to her normal self.

“Scanning for the location of fleeing foes. I’ll give orders, so use your psychokinesis to throw me in that direction!”

The glasses woman closed her eyes as if to direct her concentration towards

herself.

“... Bastards, they all went in different directions. They really did think it through. We’ll have to catch the closest one to draw out some information. Orino! Two o’ clock, 42 degree angle!”

“Got it! Here we go, Kugayama-san!”

Apparently, the glasses woman’s name was Kugayama. Orino-san held her hands towards the sky. Matching her movements, Kugayama-san shot up into the air like a rocket. Weaseling into the darkness of the night sky, she positioned herself such that I could no longer follow her with my level of eyesight.

Gunfire. Impact. A shriek. Various sounds spilled out into the air.

When I thought the sounds were over, this time, a man came falling down. Awkwardly colliding with the ground, he leaked cries of pain as he painstakingly lifted himself.

“Godforsaken... lab dogs...”

The man started off towards the trees.

“You’re not getting away!”

Orino-san lifted her hand. A single abandoned car floated in the air. As she swung her hand down, the car pierced into the ground to block off the man’s means of escape. At the feet of the man who lost his escape route, a single line was drawn from the night sky to the earth. With fearsome momentum, a meteorite made impact.

“Aight. That’s a wrap.”

The identity of the meteorite was Kugayama-san. Taking on a blow that utilized the momentum of her fall, the man showed the whites of his eyes and lost consciousness.

“A Team, take this man away. B Team, erase our traces and put out the fire. C Team keep searching for the ones on the run.”

Kugayama-san disinterestedly issued orders, and right after, a large number

of black-clad people appeared from the forest. With no wasted movements, they each set out to fulfill their own roles.

“Good work, Kugayama-san.”

As Kugayama-san took a seat on a stump, lighting up a cigarette for a puff, Orino-san approached her.

“Do you think that man will obediently confess the hiding places of his comrades?”

“If, he doesn’t the interrogation will just change to a torture session.”

“... Why did Masaki-san do something like this...”

“No unnecessary thoughts. That guy’s a traitor... don’t make that face, Orino. It’s all part of the job, nothing we can do about it.”

“... You’re right.”

“Let’s pray the man we caught hasn’t undergone anti-mental-interference training. Then we can just use Saijou’s ability to get all the info we need.”

“Saijou-kun, heh... right. For a telepathic special like him, that much should be a midday snack.”

“But rather than the man we caught, looks like there’s another trouble we have to deal with.”

After breathing out the smoke, Kugayama-san directed her sharp hawk-like eye—towards me.

“I can ‘see’ you. Yes you, brat, cowering in the shadow of that tree. Get out here.”

“... Seriously?”

Apparently, I had been completely seen through. I had considered ignoring her to run away, but I got the feeling I’d be caught in no time, so I decided to go out and apologize.

“... W-why Kagoshima... kun...”

When I emerged from the shadow of a large tree, Orino-san looked at me in disbelief.

“Orino. You know him?”

“Y-yes. He’s a classmate from high school.”

An Orino-san who couldn't conceal her bewilderment, and a blatantly displeased Kugayama-san.

"... Kagoshima-kun. Why are you in a place like this?"

"I wanted to return this to you..."

I took the card out of my pocket and delivered it to Orino-san.

"This is my ID card... I see. So you had it with you."

"Orino. You dropped your card?"

"Oh, um... yes, I'm sorry."

"And because of that, a civilian made the trek all the way here... good grief."

Kugayama-san gave me an evaluating glare. She had a bad look in her eyes, it was honestly terrifying. It felt like I was being held up by a thug. A while later, she breathed an uninterested breath.

"We're taking him over to Saijo. His memory's going poof."

"K-Kugayama-san! Please wait a second. That's way too high-handed."

"Even if it's high-handed, rules are rules. You can't put locks on human tongues, so erasing memories easiest and quickest. Better than silencing him, isn't it?"

"But that doesn't mean..."

Orino-san's face was tinted with bitterness.

"It's fine. Saijou-kun's good at his job. He'll only erase all the inconvenient stuff."

"But if you use telepathy to erase his memory, then that'll delete everything related to today's incident. And then all of Kagoshima-kun's memories with me will—"

"Be erased, most likely." She said matter-of-factly. "Even if they're not erased, they'll be influenced for the worse, in some way."

"I don't—want that."

"Don't be a baby, Orino." I couldn't think it came from a woman, that low voice like the growl of a beast. "Don't mix private matters and work. It's not like we're taking his life, just accept it."

"There are some things I just can't do."

"... Oy. You'd better listen to me while I'm still kind."

Kugayama-san swayed to her feet and—disappeared.
In the next instant as if she had teleported, she appeared behind Orino-san.
What were those movements? Did she move while I blinked?

“You get it, don’t you?” Kugayama-san placed her hands on Orino-san’s shoulders, putting in strength until they grated.
“I don’t get it.” But Orino-san didn’t pull back. She was being stubborn for once. Kugayama-san clicked her tongue and, “Hey, you,” she looked in my direction. I panicked when the talk was suddenly turned towards me, but I managed out a, “What is it?”

“When did you start watching?”
“From around when the factory exploded...”
“Then you’ve got the general idea of what’s going on, right?”

I nodded. While I only had bits and pieces of info enter my head, I grasped enough to get the whole image. The words ‘Research Facility’ printed on the card. Psychokinesis, telepathy, the psychic jargon being tossed around. So Orino-san was—a member of that sort of organization.

“You saw what you shouldn’t have. So your memory will be erased. Any complaints?”
“Ah, no... um, no matter how you look at it, isn’t this a bit sudden? I’ll need some time to prepare my heart, so if possible, could you give me a moment...?”
“You see how Orino is. If you make her stick up for you any more, her position will go down the drain. You okay with that?”
“Oh, then I’m all yours.”

I answered at once.

“Please, just go and do away with my memory.”

Both Kugayama-san and Orino-san opened their eyes wide in surprise.
Huh? Did I say anything that strange?

“... Kugayama-san. I really am against this.”
“Even if you say that—”
“Kagoshima-kun!”

Orino-san suddenly turned towards me. Her eyes were the epitome of

seriousness.

“Y-yes?”

“Please calm down and listen.”

After a deep, deep breath, Orino-san gave a soft smile and spoke.

“This is a movie.”

“.....”

“At this very moment, we are filming a movie. We just thought we’d try teasing you a bit. Threatening to erase your memory and such.”

“... Oy, Orino. Do you seriously think that...”

“Oh, so it was a movie.”

I believed her. I believed without the slightest hesitation.

My brain was not furnished with the function to hold Orino-san in doubt.

“We really had you for a minute there. Ufufu.”

“You got me good. Ahahaha.”

I see, so it was a movie. That explains everything.

You see explosion scenes in movies all the time.

Flying through the air and such, that was all wire action.

The card Orino-san dropped was a prop.

There were plenty of other things I didn’t really get, but, well, that must’ve been CG or something. I heard CGI’s amazing these days.

“I’m helping out with this college movie club, you see, and they’re making an independent movie.”

“An independent movie with an explosion scene!?”

What sort of deep-pocketed comrades do they have? Did they properly get permission?

“... Oy, what’s with this retard?”

“He is a man who knows the wonders of believing in people.”

“Sounds like he’d get conned penniless three steps out the door.”

The two quietly whispered about me. I'm pretty sure they were praising me. Yeah, let's leave it at that. Eventually, Kugayama-san shifted her sights to me.

"Oy, you, stick out your head for a second."

"Eh? I don't want to."

I thought she was going to smack me, so I firmly denied.

"Ah, you're a real pain. I'm not hitting you, just get over here. Chop chop."

Hearing that, I reluctantly leaned forward. Kugayama-san touched her hand to my forehead.

"... I thought you were just arbitrarily getting your story straight, but this guy seriously thinks we're making a movie. He's got quite a merry head on his shoulders, this one."

Unveiling a line as if she had read the contents of my head, she returned to her seat on the stump.

"Huh? Come to think of it, Orino-san. Isn't it strange that you're still called Orino while filming? If it's a movie, shouldn't they be calling you by your character's name?"

"Eh? Oh..."

Orino-san made a troubled face, as if she wanted to say, I never expected him to question the finer details.

"In the script, Orino isn't a last name, it's just my name. Orino, see. It just happened to be the same by pure chance. Truly, it's an amazing coincidence."

"A wonderful coincidence. Then what about Kugayama-san? I doubt two people could have the same names as their characters by coincidence..."

"Um... now, now, Kugayama-san. Your real name, if you will."

"Hell if I know." Said Kugayama-san (stage name) looking too fed-up to say anything else. Groaning an urrgh, Orino-san looked up at the sky for salvation. And as if hit with a flash of inspiration, she clapped her hands and turned back to me.

"Hoshizora Kirako-san!"

(TL: This loosely translates to Starrysky Sparklepants)

“... Hmm.”

That sounded like the name of an idol from a bygone era. First we have Kagurai Monyumi-senpai, and now this? Are there really so many people with pitiful names out there? My Akira is actually starting to look decent.

“Orino! You think this is a game, do you!? No matter how you cut it, that’s not going to fly!”

“I-I’m sorry. I couldn’t think of anything on the spot.”

“You don’t have to be conscious about it, Kirako-san!” I frantically went around to follow through for her.

“I think it’s a splendid and individualistic name!”

Kugayama—I mean Kirako-san made a face as if she was chewing on something sour. After clicking her tongue in what seemed like displeasure from the depths of her heart, she turned her back to us.

“Not my business, not going to deal with it. Orino. You take responsibility and do something about that man.”

Leaving those words, she walked off with long stride. She headed to where the movie staff were stationed, and exchanging words with those people, she hopped aboard a sturdy-looking truck. I’m sure the camera, and lights, and other filming equipment were inside it.

“... She’s really putting her all into that role, that Kirako-san. It truly does feel like she’s your commanding officer.”

When I said that, Orino-san lightly muttered, “I’m really sorry, Kugayama-san...”

Around ten minutes after Kirako-san and the rest of the film crew left, “And wait, they just left us here! What about my clothes!? They made off with them!” Orino-san gained an awareness of the dangerous situation she was in. Apparently, her change of clothing was in the truck. Calling them back at this point didn’t seem wise, which meant we would be climbing down the mountain on foot.

Pushing my bike along, we walked side by side down the gravel path.

I asked about the movie. Orino-san seemed to be putting considerable energy into the project, so I thought the topic might be able to liven her up. But Orino-san just made a dubious smile I couldn't put into words. It was the sort of smile furnished with the strength and kindness and wish to keep someone uninvolved with the matter.

"To summarize it..."

Research on psychic powers was carried out in secret, in a certain research facility. Its scale reached around the world, and its main branch was in America. Based on the results of their research, superpowers were merely something obtained when those genetically predisposed were faced with a trigger that awakened them. The facility constructed a system to select those with the talent, and was developing a process to awaken their latent abilities and train them. But the training method was in name alone, truthfully all they were doing was restructuring their bodies.

The training method was divided into two patterns, special and general.

"This is kinda sounding like the parameters in a training speed. Like do you want to make a power type or speed type, or perhaps even a balanced type."

"A game, huh... right. Maybe the researchers just see it all as a game."

Orino-san's expression darkened, she gave a self-deprecating laugh.

"I'm a psychokinesis special. I can't use any other powers. I can lift items up to five hundred and sixty-three point two kilograms. The radius in which I can use my abilities is within one hundred and three point four meters—is my character."

Those were some considerably specific numerical parameters she was given. Would that really come into play in the movie's main story?

"Kugayama-sa... I mean Kirako-san is a general. Psychokinesis, telepathy, teleport, clairvoyance, *etc.* She can use most abilities equally. The output of each individual power isn't that high, but she's got more ways to apply them, and no weaknesses. My commanding officer—is her part."

The two of them were superior and subordinate—was the setting, apparently. But there was something bothering me more than those detailed plot details.

“... Is the work you’re producing fifteen plus?”

“Mn? Why are you asking?”

“No... I mean, that suit is...”

When I pointed it out, Orino-san’s face turned red as she hid her body with both hands.

“T-this ‘Drive Suit’ is a culmination of the latest advancements in scientific technology! It’s made in the form most easy to move around in, and the microcomputers embedded all over it measure its wearer’s brainwaves to provide support tailored to everyone’s individual abilities—is the setting...”

It’s a movie, so they should be more accommodating. I’m sure the one who designed it was a man. Even so, Orino-san’s bust was larger than I thought: wasn’t the full destructive power of her bulge only emphasized further by that drive suit something or another?

I couldn’t tell when she was in uniform, but was this that so-called hidden valley trope? Exquisite.

“Erk... in battle—no, I mean, when filming, the adrenaline is pumping, so you don’t notice it but... now that I’m looking at it, this suit really is quite embarrassing, isn’t it...”

“I think you look good in it.”

“... That doesn’t make me happy.”

A woman’s heart is complicated.

I was only half-listening to the rest of the summary she gave, so it didn’t really remain in my head. A psychic who fled the facility gathered comrades to form a terrorist cell, and in order to hint him down, the facility threw them into live combat or something; to put it roughly, it was something like that.

I’ll be blunt, it wasn’t my sort of movie.

“I Just like mysteries and romances more than action.”

“... That so.”

I wonder why Orino-san clenched her fist as if holding back her rage.

Chapter 3: An Anime with Terrible Angles

Early afternoon on a Sunday, I strolled to get out of the crowd in front of the station.

Next to me was Kagurai-senpai. I had to fulfill the promise I made the other day, to help her buy a game for her little brother, and so came the promised day. Could this possibly be a so-called date?

A date with a beautiful senpai. There's no man in the world who wouldn't rejoice over the situation. My tensions climbed, rising at such a rate they might propel a koi straight up the waterfall into dragoonhood. Kagurai-senpai's clothing consisted of a white tank top, and skinny jeans, a simple pairing, but this must be what they mean when they say the simplest solution is usually the best one. Her splendid proportions made her look quite the part, and the way she was, she looked like she would end up on the front cover of a fashion magazine.

"So how old is your little brother, Kagurai-senpai?"

"Mn? I don't have a younger brother. If you mean my older one, then—"

"Huh? Aren't we out buying a game for your younger brother..."

"Ah, you mean him! I actually do have one. Yeah. He's got a weak sense of presence, so I completely forgot about him."

"You're a terrible older sister."

As we mixed words, our destination was a large-scale otaku culture specialty shop in front of the station. Anima, manga, light novels, games, doujinshi and the like; it was a shop compromised by the grand breadth of the culture. As long as you made the trek, you'd be able to obtain most otaku-ish merchandise our there.

Honestly, I didn't want to take her here. But the games senpai said she wanted were a new release, a last-generation release, a mainstream one, and a minor one, her selection was splendidly varied. If we wanted to get our hands on all of them, this shop was our only bet in town.

"... Umm, games are on the third floor."

I gazed at the floor guide near the entrance. It was a shop I didn't usually use,

so I didn't know my way around. The first floor was the anime area, and dotted around the interior were boards featuring two-dimensional girls. The song being broadcast was also an anime song. This really isn't the right place for a date, I regretted as I looked at Kagurai-senpai.

"Ooooh..."

Her long-slit eyes gave a fierce glimmer, and with movements like the wind, she had slipped into the shop's interior.

"This is the first edition limited release version... amazing, it even comes with a figure! Aah! This is the box set! No way, you mean to tell me it comes with a novel by the original author!? Wonderful!"

She gazed spellbound at the anime DVDs lining one of the walls... so Kagurai-senpai was an otaku? That was a considerable surprise. But her attitude intrigued me. Rather than an otaku who got fired up over a beautiful girl character, she had something nobler, if I had to describe it, the air of an archeologist witnessing a mummy in its original state.

"I never thought there would be such a wonderful place this side of town... 'tis my blunder."

"... Kagurai-senpai, do you like this sort of thing?"

"Yeah. I've got a thing for classic literature, especially Heisei manuscripts."

(TL: The Heisei era, 1989-present day)

Classics? Heisei Era?

Ignoring my questions, Kagurai-senpai started speaking as if she was reading straight out of a history textbook.

"In the prime of the Heisei era, it became popular among a generation called the otaku, Anime, figurines, light novels, manga and the like, later classified as Heisei era Literature. Commonly referred to as Otaku Culture. A movement defined by a pursuit of the romantic ideal called 'moe', it is a time-honored facet of Japan's culture."

"....."

"Everyone in my family's a Heisei Era fanatic, you see. There were a number of literary references around the house. I particularly enjoyed the works that grappled with the psychological struggle of tsundere. Just last summer break, I

wrote a research paper on the ‘reformation of the tsundere’ and even won prize money for it.”

“... Senpai, so you know what tsundere means.”

“What are you talking about? Tsundere is the very first unit you learn in ancient literature, is it not? Tsundere, yandere, kuudere. The three conjugations of dere. Yes, it is a wonderful word that expresses the inner charm of a woman.”

Her tone was that of a classic literature teacher trying to convey the greatness of The Tale of Genji.

“I always wanted to read the original source texts, so I studied the language and words of this time like crazy. So how is it, Kagoshima? My use of words? Do you hear anything off?”

“... Me? No, I can’t hear any problems.”

“I know right? Well, classics were always my strong suit, so studying it was always a blast.”

Fufufu, she proudly laughed before.

“— Wait, nooo!”

Giving off a sense of, crap, I got carried away and said all sorts of things I shouldn’t have, Kagurai-senpai frantically shook her head.

“Ah, yeah. Well, if a person from the future ever came to this era, I’m sure that’s precisely how they around react. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

“Oh, so that’s what it was about. You’d lost me for a second there.”

Seriously, Kagurai-senpai has a good sense of humor. But that speech she gave was surprisingly interesting. A thousand years later, perhaps there’ll be a time when otaku culture is learned in classic literature classrooms. When you really boil it down, The Tale of Genji and The Pillow Book we learn about in classics are just novels. More than their contents, they’re evaluated for being products of a past era.

Kagurai-sensei filled her basket with stack upon stack of DVD and Blue Ray. With an expression of contained ecstasy, she continued strolling the store in genuine joy. Slightly weary, I silently tagged along.

“Wait, senpai! That’s the eighteen plus restricted corner. Why are you nonchalantly trying to walk in!?”

As she infiltrated the area lined with erotic anime and games, I frantically pulled her to a halt.

“You fool!”

She shouted at me.

“Just what do you take Japan’s time-honored cultural heritage to be!? Looking upon the fine arts with indecent eyes is the most indecent act of all!”

Hers was the resentment as if I had gravely insulted her by writing off the Birth of Venus as ‘just a nude’, or the Tale of Genji as, ‘plain erotica’.

No, it’s not like I couldn’t see where she was coming from, but...

Leaving me behind in my hesitation, senpai boldly stepped into the restricted corner. Right after, there were some rustles and the sound of running, as the men with panicked faces made their escape.

Anyone’d be surprised if such a beauty suddenly went in. I understand how you feel, my dear gents.

“... What about her little brother’s games?”

Kagurai-senpai didn’t seem to be coming out, so I aimlessly wandered the store. Looking over an anime about psychics, I thought back to Orino-san for some reason, and looking at an anime about a witch, a picture of Kurisu-chan surfaced in my head.

They dealt with themes impossible in any realistic framework, they were collections of fiction.

I started thinking back.

Back to when I still believed in Santa Clause, and the Secret Organization, and the Hero of Justice who hid his identity to protect the world, back to elementary school.

Back to when I wanted to become an ally of justice.

I think those events back at Gentle Breeze Park reshaped my personality. Back then, why did I...

Brrrrrrriiiiiinnnnnnnnngggggggg!

An ear-piercing emergency bell dragged my consciousness back to reality.

“W-what’s this?”

An emergency broadcast soon resounded through the store.

‘This is a message to all customers in the buildings. A fire has just broken out on the sixth floor of this building. Please follow the staff’s instruction and evacuate in an orderly fashion.’

The announcement instantly caused a ruckus through the store. The staff hastily began guiding the customers fleeing to save themselves.

“What happened!?”

Alongside a voice filled with tension, Kagurai-senpai emerged from the restricted area... But seeing her come out hoisting up a large box of erotic games in both hands, she didn’t give off an iota of tension.

“A fire broke out on an upper floor. Let’s get out of here, fast.”

“What?” Kagurai-senpai’s expression suddenly turned grim. “... It can’t be.”

“It very well did. Now we’ve got to get away.”

The two of us headed for the entrance. When we passed by a store personnel,

“What do you mean the sprinklers won’t turn on?”

“I don’t know. It looks like the problem’s with the electric control system... we have someone more knowledgeable looking into the cause, but it’s not going too well...”

“... What is going on in here.”

A cruel conversation entered our ears. Kagurai-senpai’s face further increased in severity.

“Gakuta.”

“Yeah, there’s no doubt, it’s Reloader’s work.”

She took her cell phone from her back and suddenly broke into ventriloquism.

“But I can’t see their goal in this one. Probably a buggles that leaked ‘cuz they suck at locking things up.”

“What a troublesome bunch. They could at least manage their buggles properly.”

As Kagurai-senpai continued her ventriloquism through such a heavy atmosphere, I spoke up.

“Hey, Kagurai-senpai! Now’s not the time to play around!”

“Ah, for the love of god! I know that, just shut it for a second!”

Pushing me aside, she restarted her conversation with Gakuta-kun.

I-it’s no good...

Kagurai-senpai is panicking...

She’s talking to Gakuta-kun to escape from reality.

She was surprisingly weak in a pinch. Damn. I have to do something.

“Kagurai-senpai, get a hold of yourself! At times like these, we need to cool our heads and remember the three rules of fire! ‘Don’t push’, ‘Don’t speak’, ‘Don’t talk’! ... Huh? Aren’t don’t talk and don’t speak the same thing... ah, right. Just remember—”

(TL: The second one is supposed to be don’t run.)

“Kagoshima!”

Her scream made me go blank. And I was so close to remembering it!

“You get out first! There’s something I have to do!”

“No way! There’s no way I could you behind and run!”

“... Your manliness is an eyesore.”

Grimacing, Kagurai-senpai cried out, “So computers are sold in the basement,” as she checked with the floor guide and suddenly sprinted off. She sped down the escalator three steps at a time.

Naturally, I followed along. It was dangerous to leave a hysterical Kagurai-senpai to her own devices. My sense of justice spurred me on!

... And yet, I got the slight inkling I was doing something unnecessary. How peculiar.

“Why are you following me, Kagoshima!?”

“Because you’re running!”

“You’re in the way! Get out!”

“I’m not leaving. No matter how much you come to hate me, I’m going to protect you!”

“... It pisses me off I found that one a little cool.”

From the newest models to second hand, there were various PCs placed around the first basement floor. Kagurai-senpai took a sweeping look around.

“Gakuta. Find me a PC that can connect to B3 World.”

“On it— — —. Report’s in. There are quite a few around here. The one you’ve got the best compatibility with is that one on sale. Not that it’s any comparison with that school PC you remodeled like crazy. Your synchro rate will drop to 70 at best. Kekeke, you gonna be alright?”

“Not a problem. You can see the damages, we’re not dealing with much of an enemy here.”

She said as she stood before a PC on a special discount.

“Kagurai-senpai! I’m telling you, this is no time for ventriloquism!”

“..... Tsk.”

This guy really is a pain, her eyes told me. Eh? Why?

“Woow, I’m sooo sleepy.”

Kagurai-senpai suddenly gave an intentional-looking yawn.

“Oh my, I’m super, duper sleepy. I haven’t slept for a whole week, after all.”

“Is that true!? You’re skin’s so glossy, I’d have never thought it!”

“I’m going to sleep a bit. I’ll be asleep around ten minutes. Don’t wake me up.”

“What!? You’re going to sleep in this satiation!? There’s a fire going on upstairs!”

“I said I’m sleeping, and that’s why I’m going to do. Wake me and you’re dead. Also, disconnect the cellphone strapped to Gakuta from that PC and you’re dead.”

Pressured with the intimidating aura of a large bear, I could only nod. Senpai gave a satisfied nod, turning back to the computer. She connected her Gakuta-strapped phone to the terminal.

“Dive In B3 World! Code KAGURAI Access!”

She shouted before her head flopped down, and her conscious was gone in the same way I’d seen it before. I hurriedly reached out my hand to support her body.

“... Uwah, she really fell asleep.”

There should be a limit to being free-spirited.

She said she'd kill me if I woke her up, but no matter how I looked at it, waking her was definitely the best option. We were in the basement, so it was possible the flames wouldn't reach us, but it went without saying we were better off getting out.

"Hey, Kagurai-senpai. Please get up."

I shook her body, but it had no effect. She was deep asleep; as if her mind had been transferred to a different world entirely, she showed no reaction whatsoever.

Her faintly swaying eyelashes, and the breaths escaping her lips. Her body was completely entrusted to me.

"... If you don't wake up, I'll sexually harass you."

No response.

"..."

I went silent at the point I should definitely say something. Gulp, I swallowed down my spit.

'Any funny moves, and you're dead.'

"...!"

A voice came from the computer speaker. It was very similar to Kagurai-senpai's voice, but senpai was still asleep, so there was no way that could be the case. On closer inspection, a 3D anime was playing on the screen.

Oh, so it was audio from the anime. Ah, that was a surprise.

It was boring to just wait for her to open her eyes, so I decided to watch the 3D-rendered anime that was coincidentally streaming.

Here and there in a pale-blue techno environment, semi-transparent pyramids and cubes floated about. Occasionally, the noise of a game bugging out would run.

A single figure soared freely around that inorganic field.

Her long hair glimmered like the milky way. On her head, round, bearish ears twitched back and forth, and on her back sprouted six diamond-shaped wings. Both her hair and proportions resembled Kagurai-senpai, But I'm sure it was just a coincidence.

In the warrior's right hand, a futuristic sword shifted in shape to a gun and a

boomerang, as she took out small-fry-looking insectoid characters one after the next.

The perspective shots were terrible in the anime.

I couldn't see a single shot of the fighting woman's face. It was almost as if she was putting effort into making sure I couldn't see her. The female warrior scattered small fries as she kept pressing forwards, finally arriving at what looked like a boss monster.

A giant centipede made out of stiff angular polygons. As the name implied, its limbs numbered around one hundred, and it was somewhat grotesque. There were scissor-like fangs in its mouth, and every time it moved them, my ears were filled with an unpleasant grating sound.

'Kekeke. It's just as I thought.'

Whenever the warrior's bear ear's moved, a man's voice came in conjunction. It was quite similar to Gakuta-kun's voice, meaning the voice Kagurai-senpai made when she was practicing ventriloquism.

'That's over there's a buggles that hasn't received 'ny orders. It's just randomly going on a rampage. It's a lowly grunt with only a big body going for it. Man, it's a shame it had to be such a boring enemy.'

'Let's get this over with, and fast. I want to keep damages to a minimum.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

The warrior burst off towards the centipede.

'Lill Sordia—mode change—Category 4—Lost Cannon.'

Clink, clank, through mechanical motions, the sword in her right hand transformed into a ridiculously large cannon. It was a bizarre transformation that was clearly violating the law of conservation of mass.

Taking the cannon that looked about the size of her own body, she locked it in place on her right arm, all the while evading legs fired from the centipede, gradually closing the distance between them.

'Energy loading—98—99 – Full Charge. Ready to fire when you are.'

Narrowly avoiding a large piercing attack of a number of sharp appendages put together, aiming for the single instant where her enemy's posture would crumble, the warrior sprinted through space.

She slammed the cannon's muzzle into the centipede's massive forehead. At the same time, her six wings, spread out wide behind her, clad in a light I would even call sublime.

'It's world over.'

The moment she pulled the trigger, the entire screen was taken in a white flash.

"... Well, quite a bit's gone into the animation budget."

The anime ended, the screen faded to black. The reason there was no ending theme must be because this was a promotional video. As if she timed it to match with the anime's end, Kagurai-senpai opened her eyes.

"Ah, you're finally up. Good grief..."

"... Yeah, good morning."

There was a slight hint of fatigue on Kagurai-senpai's face. Because she only got some half-baked sleep, it looked like it only made her even more tired.

"Now then. Let's-hurry and get out of here."

"No, you don't have to be so hasty. The sprinklers are operational now, so the fire should be contained soon. I went through the footage from the security cameras, but there wasn't anyone who couldn't get out."

"Yeah, yeah. How long do you plan to space out for?"

"..."

She glared at me. I wonder why. Was she not a morning person? After that, I urged Kagurai-senpai on as she took her sweet time, and we exited the store. The fire trucks and ambulances had arrived, a crowd of rubberneckers had assembled. From what I could tell based on the words flying around the crowd, there were no casualties.

Apparently an unnatural overheating of a computer on the sixth floor has become the cause of the fire. The main problem was that the sprinklers were a few minutes late to activate, or so I heard. Meaning it was an accident.

"... We never got to buy that game for your brother."

What a spot of bad luck, I thought as I took a peek at Kagurai-senpai standing beside me.

“It’s fine. We can buy a game anytime.”

For some reason, her side profile was cheery.

Chapter 4: Study Meet

Three days after the fire. I found myself at home reading the month's edition of Corocoro comics when I got a call from Kagurai-senpai. She asked if I would 'teach her classics'.

"Classics?"

'Yeah, I've got supplementary lessons this weekend, but I haven't the slightest idea how to study what...'

Rare from my bold senpai, she wounded downhearted.

"Didn't you say classics were your strong point?"

'Umm... to me, classics are... I mean to say, I'm knowledgeable on the literature of this era, but I've got nothing on Heian Era documents. In my high school, The Tale of Genji only came up a bit in name, so...'

(TL: Heian Era, 794-1185)

It occurred to me that Kagurai-senpai was a returnee. If she was thrown into third-year classic literature classes after only just returning to Japan, of course she wouldn't know what was going on.

"Sure. If you're alright with me."

'I'm sorry for this. You have my gratitude.'

After hanging up, I sat deep in the sofa and crossed my arms in thought. Come to think of it, I promised to help Kurisu-chan study as well. Perhaps I had made too many arrangements without due consideration...

In the first place, it's not like I was that good at studying. I was stuck being taught by Orino-san after all...

"... Ah, that just might work."

"And that's why I noticed I just had to hold a study session with the four of us."

After school the next day, I gathered up Orino-san, Kurisu-chan, and Kagurai-

senpai in the ComClub room on the top floor of the school building.

If you pushed the formation of computers to the side, it was easy to secure enough space for four people to study. When it came to holding a study session, there was no place more appropriate.

“Let’s all cooperate, and get rid of all our weak points one by one. Teaching other people is also a wonderful way to learn.”

“Sure,” “Understood,” “Very well.”

At my words, the three girls nodded. No, but was it really alright for me to get a taste of this sort of harem? Am I in for some divine retribution down the line? When the study session started, the three of them were particularly close, but they quickly warmed up to one another. Rapidly, as if they all shared a common worry.

I started out with trying to teach Kurisu-chan geography.

“Well then, Kurisu-chan. What’s the tallest mountain in the world?”

“That’s an easy one. The Azalier Mountain Range in the south of the Claire Continent.”

“It’s Everest.”

“That’s not true, Kagoshima-senpai. The Azalier Mountain Range is a whole three hundred meters taller than Everest so... no, it’s nothing.”

“Then the longest river in the world?”

“The Torrone river that divides the Holy Principality of Barna into east and west.”

“It’s the Nile.”

“And I’m telling you, it’s... no, I’m sorry, I made a mistake.”

“Next, the capital of America?”

“Ah, that one doesn’t get jumbled up. Umm... as I recall, it’s got a name like that monster bird from the plains of Domke... umm... is it W-Washington?”

“You got it.”

“Yay!”

“Good work, cadet.”

“Thank you! My studies weren’t useless.”

Returning a forced smile to Kurisu-chan’s beaming joy, I was desperately holding back my cold sweat.

This is bad, real bad.

She was so lacking in common sense, I found it strange she managed to get into our school at all. Was it magic? Did a wizard do it? I suddenly felt tired, but it was time to teach Kagurai-senpai classics.

“If you want to read classics, you’ll have to learn some old words, or you won’t get anywhere. For example ‘betwixt’ means ‘between’, and ‘afeard’ means ‘afraid’. How about we start by learning some of those?”

“What about maid uniform and glasses girl?”

“That’s not old tongue, that’s otaku tongue.”

“In my high school, we started our lessons from that sort of vocabulary.....”

“Also, it’s good to learn an author and his works as a set. The Tale of Genji is Murasaki Shikibu. The Pillow Book is Sei Shounagon. The author of The Tale of The Bamboo Cutter is unknown.”

“Ah, if it’s about The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, recent research’s actually pinned down the writer.”

“No, please don’t mess with me. The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter is of unknown origin.”

“In what era?”

“The current era.”

I managed to return a smile, but this really was tiring. This person was also lacking in modern day common sense. Did she use some futuristic super science to get into this school or something? Fighting the hard fight alongside Orino-san, we somehow continued teaching the two. Ah... but it’s kinda fun. This laid-back feeling is comfortable.

It was a moment where I could truly feel first hand that the world was at peace. If this peace could continue on forever... when the thought hit my mind, it could continue no longer. First was Kurisu-chan.

“... T-this magic is...”

She suddenly said some pubescent statement and stood from her seat.

“I’m sorry. I have to return for the day. Um, thank you very much!”

While I was taken aback, she hastily left the club room.

“K-Kurisu-chan!”

I followed her into the hallway. But she was no longer anywhere to be seen. She's surprisingly fast on her feet, apparently. I was bothered by the fact the window before me was open, but we were on the top floor. Only a bird or a witch could leave through there.

"What could've happened with Kurisu?"

To Kagurai-senpai's question, "Who knows," was all I could say back, before the studies continued.

Next was Orino-san.

"... M-my stomach!"

She held her abdomen and groaned.

"A-are you okay, Orino-san?"

"Yeah, just a little, I'll have to take my leave."

"Umm, the closest bathroom from here is... next to the biology storage, I think. You don't come up here often, do you know where that is? Let me take you there."

"... I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm not going to that restroom or how should I put it..."

"Ah, could it be you're the sort who can only use western-style toilets?"

"W-wrong! I'm totally fine with Japanese—what am I even saying..."

Ah, I don't care anymore! She angrily cried, closing the door behind her with tremendous momentum.

"O-Orino-san!"

It looked like I made her angry, so in order to apologize, I ran after her.

But when I opened the door, Orino-san was gone.

And for some reason, the window was open. Shen I just closed it a moment ago. Why?

Well, I'm sure it was just a coincidence. The only ones who could leave from there would have to be birds, witches... and psychics, I guess. I closed the window without digging too deep, and returned to the classroom.

Finally, it was Kagurai-senpai.

"Gyahahaha! Oy, Monyumi. It's work. The bastard finally showed up."

“Are you sure about that, Gakuta?”

“Yeah. My scanning system’s fully operational. ‘n wait, he’s freakin’ inviting us. Making sure there’s no way we can miss him.”

“Hmm. He doesn’t know who he’s dealing with. So be it. This time, I’ll settle the score.”

I stared discontently as Kagurai-senpai suddenly started practicing her ventriloquism. Is she emotionally unstable or something? Perhaps she’s afflicted with some sort of psychological disorder.

Noticing my blank line of sight, Kagurai-senpai gave an intentional-looking yawn.

“Oh, I sure am sleepy. I don’t think I’ve slept this whole week.”

“What do you even do at night!?”

“Ah, it’s no good. I don’t think I’ll be able to bear it all the way hom. I have no choice but to sleep here and now. Yep. Sleep it is. So you can go home, Kagoshima.”

“We should at least get to a good stopping point first.”

I felt a glance that urged me to read the mood, but that was surely my imagination.

“... Whatever. Anyways, don’t wake me up. Don’t touch my cellphone. Once you get to a good stopping point, you can do what you want.”

Kagurai-senpai sat in front of the computer, and after shouting her usual dive something something, she fell asleep as if struck death. I wonder if that yell of hers is a charm for sweet dreams or something.

After that, I studied around thirty minutes, but Kagurai-senpai didn’t wake up.

After leaving an, ‘I went home’ note, I scribbled MonyuMonyuMonyuMi on her forehead before leaving the club room. I was worried about Orino-san, so I tried looking all over school, but she wasn’t anywhere to be found. It seemed she headed straight back

Once I reached home, I tried calling the three of them, but no one picked up.

“... snff.”

Am I actually hated...?

I seriously started to worry about it at seventeen years of age.

Luckily, truly luckily, it seemed that I wasn't hated after all.
The next day, everyone returned my texts, and even called me (I got an earful from Kagurai-senpai). It seems that everyone's just quite busy.
So without any major incidents occurring—
Granted,
Orino-san would still leave early from stomach pains,
I spotted Kurisu-chan in cosplay from time to time,
Kagurai-senpai would fall asleep without warning,
While there were such trivial happenings going on, they weren't what I could call an incident. Whatever the case, without any major incidents occurring, our days went on.

Chapter 5: Ventriloquism

After school one day, I climbed the stairs towards the ComClub's room. Kagurai-senpai said, "Gakuta wants to play games with you. Apparently, my power is insufficient. It seems I'm no good at retro games where you have to use a controller," to invite me. I think she meant I would be having a competition with her. The game happened to be the one I was currently hooked on, so I was definitely up to give it a go.

More than anything, I was overjoyed to be able to play games alone with senpai. It was adorable how she was too embarrassed to invite me, instead using Gakuta-kun as an excuse. I was so happy I ended up arriving ahead of schedule.

"—Brain— World, B3 World for—"

I heard a voice from the club room. She seemed to be practicing her ventriloquism again.

Growing curious over what they were talking about, I crouched down and inclined an ear.

"The buggles they scattered through this era are mostly cleaned up."
"Doesn't matter, we'll probably be in this era a while longer. There are other things we have to settle."

"I know, Gakuta. I quite like this time period, so I don't mind. No matter how far I dig into Heisei Literature, I never hit the bottom. 'Moe' truly is wonderful."

"You really like playing at being a literary girl. You really don't look the part."

"You think you look like someone who enjoys retro games?"

"Gyahahaha! No doubt about that."

"... Hey, Gakuta. Are we really doing the right thing?"

"... Mn?"

"In our time, human lives have started to be ruled by the computer. Almost everyone spends more than half of their day in the virtual—the B3 world. It's an era where it's been deemed abnormal not to be dependent on the net. If you want an extreme example, there are couples who meet, who marry, who live, who die in that land of ones and zeroes, once never meeting in reality... as

people, as lifeforms, there's no way that's the right course..."

"And the one who thought that and took action on it was 'Reloader'—meaning our enemy."

"Their goal is simple, understandable. The complete destruction of information technology. For that sake, they aimed for the era the internet spread, and leaped into the past."

"They want to reform history. They've got to be stopped, isn't that what an ironclad hero of justice would do?"

"I wish it was as simple as those old-age movies. Hey, Gakuta. I've already noticed it. That those folks upstairs are hiding something."

"..."

"The way we're going, humanity will be destroyed, right?"

"... Yeah. That's right."

"As I thought."

"In the near future... a few hundred years, mind you, but eventually, the machines will completely supersede the humans. The B3 World will no longer be managed by human hands. With artificial intelligence, right now flesh and blood humans outnumber them eight to two, but I'm sure that'll reverse eventually."

"So slowly, so slowly, humanity will perish, won't it."

"That's right. Gyahahaha! And those heroes of justice who wanted to do something, gave it a go, were 'Reloader'. Though the guys up top covered it up."

"How ironic. All my colleagues believe they're working for humanity's sake."

"The facts won't help their motivation. That's why they're silently deceived and worked to the point. Gyahaha. So, Monyumi. What're you gonna do?

Abandoning your duties? Or are you gonna ask 'Reloader' to let you join their gang?"

"... I'm not changing anything. I'm going to live as I always have."

"Hmmm."

"Don't you think humanity should perish?"

"....."

"After doing whatever they wanted and bringing it all onto themselves, it's inevitable that they fall. Just because it's become possible to jump to the past,

that doesn't make for a reason to change history. And the way they're going about it is a little too forceful for my tastes. The way I see it, they're just plunging the world into chaos with their hapless struggle."

"Quite a tongue on 'ya. Well, the higherups hold pretty much the same outlook. And of course, they're searching for other ways to prolong humanity's existence."

"It's pointless. Humanity will fall. Once humanity falls, a different force will rule this planet. Once they fall, it'll be the next. And as the generations go by, and by, the earth itself will eventually perish. And a new planet will be born. That's all there is to it. Nothing much, in the grand scheme of things."

"Oh me oh my, playing it cool I see, Monyumi."

"But even I won't let it be forcefully brought to ruin by someone's hand. This is just something like humanity's lifespan."

"You say the darndest things. So the 'present' is where humanity contracts its incurable ailment. The ones who're desperately trying to prolong its life, by all means, are 'Reloader', and we're the ones who want it to die in peace."

"I do want to let it die in peace. That way will surely be for humanity's sake."

"Keh. That so. Well 'n, to my magnificent AI self, I guess it doesn't really matter. Whether 'Reloader's revolution succeeds or fails, I don't give a damn."

"... I know you care."

"Like hell I do."

"Of course, you care. I mean, we're family, after all."

"....."

"Isn't that right, big brother?"

"... What might 'ya be talking about? I don't know the first thing about that stupid spy who got his body all burnt up by 'Reloader'."

"..."

"I'm just your adorable little mascot character. With the wickedest tongue out there, your cute Gakuta-kun. Gyahaha! My only function's to provide you some battle support when you dive into B3 World, just an AI pet."

"... Right you are."

“You got that. Well, if I were your dumbass brother, then I think this’s what I’d say at a time like this. ‘Do your best’ I’d say.”

“Gakuta...”

A solemn, yet be that as it may, a warm air leaked out from the club room. I was crying. At such sadness, such sorry, I couldn’t hold back my tears. So Gakuta-kun wasn’t just a stuffed animal. Kagurai-senpai’s hobby wasn’t something like ventriloquism. She just... needed someone to talk to.

“... hic.”

She always put on a strong front, but she actually wanted friends so badly she didn’t know what to do with herself. She was too embarrassed to honestly come out and say, ‘please be my friend’. That’s why she used Gakuta, always practicing how to speak to people.

Ventriloquism wasn’t a hobby, it was something she just happened to pick up while practicing how to talk to people, a sorrowful trick. My own teary sobs were so loud, a majority of the contents of her conversation didn’t enter my head, but I fully understood the circumstances. I was sure I didn’t, but understood that I did.

Kagurai-senpai was really a kind and delicate woman.

Her strong attitude was armor to protect her tender heart.

I wiped my tears and slammed the door open.

“Kagurai-senpai!”

“K-Kagoshima!? At least knocked. You surprised me there...”

Rapidly closing the distance, I strongly grasped both her hands.

“Please know that I’m your friend!”

“I-I see. Thank you...”

Kagurai-senpai seemed somewhat reluctant. While I felt an immense difference in our levels of enthusiasm, I wouldn’t stop.

“So please stop using your stuffed animal for conversation practice!”

“Ah...”

Her tired smile gave an impression somewhere along the lines of, this guy is making another merry misunderstanding.

... How strange. This was supposed to be where she was moved to tears and jumped into my chest.

“Let’s seal Gakuta-kun. As long as you have him, your heart will never open up!”

“Oy, brat! I shut up for one minute, and you get on your high horse. You think I—”

Swiftly, silently, Gakuta’s mouth that had burst into yelling was covered up by Kagurai-senpai.

“Thank you, Kagoshima. But you see, Gakuta-kun is also a precious friend. He’s a comrade who’s fought by my side.”

“... Ptooey.” Said Gakuta-kun.

While being a stuffed animal, his head looked like it was turning red for some reason. I couldn’t bring myself to accept it, but I got the inkling the matter was resolved, so I decided not to think too hard about it. Both of them (?) seemed happy enough, so lie and let live.

“Now how about we start the game? You know what I called you here today.”

Kagurai-senpai lined up chairs and pressed the power button on the TV and game console.

“Entertain Gakuta-kun all you can.”

“Umm. In the end, that means I’ll be fighting you, right senpai? Gakuta-kun is a stuffed animal so...”

“That’s right. In short, I’ll be operating Gakuta, and Gakuta will operate the game.”

Looking closely, Gakuta-kun’s form had changed from when I last saw him. A hole had been opened around his bottom so that a hand could enter. He was becoming even more like a ventriloquism doll.

“Well, to summarize, I’m giving you a handicap,” Kagurai-senpai grinned. “Just goes to show, my stuffed animal is more than a match for you.”

“Kuh. You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

‘Why are we going through such a pain in the ass, Monyumi?’

‘It can’t be helped. If we don’t do this, we can’t play it off. I’m letting you game,

'You opened a damn hole in my prided hips. This goes beyond hemorrhoids.'

'Shut it.'

“Alright, let the games begin.”

“Nnnnnnnnnnnnaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa——!”

“W-what’s wrong, Kagurai-senpai!?”

"Eh? Isn't it you, senpai?"

“My ass! My ass, my ass—! I’m getting a real off feeling about this! Naa!”

“Pull it out, pull it out! Seriously pull it out! Hurry and pull it out, Monyumi!”

“NNAaaa! Don’t move it! It feels disgusting, disgusting—!”

“Gyaaaah! My little sister’s digging me out! My little sister is...”

“S-s-silence Gakuya! Don’t recognize me as your sister now of all times!”

“No more fisting—Kuh! No more incest!”

"D-damnit... it's not coming out..."

“This is bad, this is bad! What’s so bad? It’s bad that it’s starting to feel a little noce!”

“Noooo—!”

Kagurai-senpai raised a truly girly scream, performed an overhead throw as if

to nail in a one hundred seventy kilometer per hour fastball. Gakuta-kun popped off her hand, “erk!” he collided with the opposite wall. “I can’t get married anymore...” he muttered with a somewhat entranced face. Kagurai-senpai’s face was red, her breath rough.

“..... Uwah.”

I was taken aback.

Of course, Gakuta-kun was just a stuffed animal, so every single thing that just happened would have to be Kagurai-senpai’s one-man act. I never thought she was the sort of person to tell such terribly dirty jokes...

“W-wait, Kagoshima. Don’t try to quietly leave the room while you still have the chance.”

“... Umm, a moment ago, I said I was your friend, but please just write me down as a pen pal.”

“He gently took distance!”

“I don’t hate you, senpai, but... my mom always told me I shouldn’t go out with someone lacking in moral decency...”

“Noo! You’re wrong, you wrong Kagoshima! That was an unforeseen incident! I’m not the sort of woman who would show off dirty jokes to my underclassmen! I’m actually no good with dirty humor... umm... so, I’m not the sort of pervert who would repeatedly cry out indecent words!”

“Wait, you’re not?”

“..... Fu... fufufu. Fwahahahaha! Yeah, that’s right. I’m just a perverted woman who’ll say all manner of dirty words!”

Gazing at the smile of someone driven to madness through severe damage to the heart, I gently shut the door.

Let’s just pretend today never happened.

Chapter 6: Kuria's Grand Adventure

Saturday noon, Orino-san and I were on the terrace of an Italian restaurant in front of the station. We had come to see a movie together, and were on the way back.

Yesterday, 'I used my connections in the movie club to get some presale tickets, but do you want to go?' Orino-san invited me out. To me, it felt like she had quite purposely prepared the tickets to make a strong appeal to the fact she was indeed in a movie club, but that's just what you call reading too deeply into it.

After brushing off all the food and draining the water in my cup, I asked.

"What do you want to do now? I think it's a little early to go home."

"Right."

She put her hand to her chin in thought. It was a cute, girly gesture. When I looked at her mouth unable to conceal its smile, my own mood warmed up. And there—the uncouth vibrating sound of a cellphone resounded.

"... Ah."

A moment later, Orino-san's expression clouded. As if she knew exactly what was going on from the vibration pattern.

"You're not going to answer?"

"I will. I'm sorry..."

Standing from her seat, she answered the phone a little away. After exchanging a few words, she returned with an apologetic face.

"Sorry... um, I have some urgent business to attend to, so I have to get going."

"Really? ... I see. Then there's nothing we can do about it."

"I'm sorry..."

"It's fine. If it's urgent, you'd better go."

She apologized with a truly pained face, making me feel apologetic myself.

"... You're not suspicious?"

The words softly spilled from Orino-san's mouth.

"Suspicious of what?"

I couldn't tell the meaning of her question.

"I might be lying to you. About urgent business, and my stomach hurting..."

At her faint voice as if her heart was leaking, I tilted my head even further.

"Why would you have to lie to me?"

"... Never mind. I'm sorry I asked such a strange question."

Well then, Orino-san left in a hurry.

Her back looked extremely unreliable, too fleeting to entrust the world.

"Orino-san!"

I ended up calling out.

"I'll be waiting for you."

Orino-san turned in surprise.

"I'll be waiting. Until you finish your business, I'll be in the area. Today, I feel like playing with you some more."

"... Okay. Thank you!"

Her cloudy face slightly clearing, Orino-san ran off. Her step was a little lighter than before.

"I wonder what she has to do..."

I pondered a bit, but quickly stopped thinking.

I went to the arcade and department store to kill time. Along the way, Kagurai-senpai called me. When I wondered what it was, she reported she was returning to her parents' house.

'So you won't be able to call me for a while, but don't worry about it.'

"Is your parents' house out of service? Could it be out in the country..."

'No, that's not it, but... well, just know you won't be able to get in touch. It's too far away.'

“Where is it?”

‘By the standards of this world, as I recall... it should be around Shibuya.’

“That’s really close.”

‘It’s close space-wise, but time-wise... no, never mind. It’s nothing.’

Kagurai-senpai’s voice had more intensity and leisure than before. Like a seasoned warrior who overcame a life or death struggle, and matured, she had increased in awe.

The reason she was returning home was owing to the fact she had finished up a job, apparently.

... I wonder why, I got the feeling I just missed a climax. Like a new finishing move, and a wager with the last boss, and some drama between brother and sister, the sort of feeling that I completely missed out on all of it.

‘Well, I should be back after around a week.’

She said before hanging up the line.

That person went as far as skipping school to go home. I wonder what she was doing.

Thinking over such things, I killed even more time.

Orino-san returned passed six in the evening.

“Kagoshima-kun!”

I was sitting on a bench in the station-front plaza, and when I raised my face from the Corocoro I was reading, I saw Orino-san jogging towards me.

“... I’m really sorry. I kept you waiting.”

“It’s fine. I said it before, but I don’t hate boredom.”

I put my Corocoro away in my bag... huh, it won’t fit. I guess Corocoro really is just too big. But don’t think that’s going to stop me! Hup. Hup. Hup!
Snap!

“... Do you want to go buy a bag?”

“..... Yeah.”

(TL: An Issue of Corocoro Comics is approximately 750 pages long (~6cm))

I walked with Orino-san through the darkened residential district. I really wanted to walk her home, but, “I can’t reveal the location of my house to a civilian... I-I mean my father is very strict, so if a man escorts me back, it’ll get a little...” so while it pained my heart, the arrangement reversed, and she was walking me back to my house.

“There are less children playing around these days, though the park is getting old. I heard they’re going to flatten it and make a parking lot.”

“I see. It’s always a little sad, when that happens.”

“I’m also sad. I’ve got some memories here.”

“Memories?”

“Yeah. Back in elementary school, I met a wonderful person here.”

Feeling a tingling sorrow like the pain of being pricked with a pin, I proceeded through the empty park. At that moment, the misanga on my right arm let off a faint light. But it quickly died out.

“... Hm? What’s this?”

Next to the stone slab that spelled out ‘Gentle Breeze Park’, it was scribbled in with chalk: a complicated shape made of circles and quadrilaterals.

“I wonder what it is. It kinda looks like a magic circle.”

“I’m sure some kid doodled it.”

Good grief, what are they doing to public property? The park belongs to everyone. My civil service spirit revived, I borrowed a picked tissue from Orino-san and got to erasing the white doodle.

I gave a light wipe, and the moment one portion of the doodle was gone, Clink!

Came the sound of breaking glass.

“W-what?”

I nervously looked around in surprise.

In the center of Gentle Breeze Park that had been empty up to a moment ago, Kurisuchan was collapsed.

“Kurisuchan!?”

Orino-san and I rushed in.

“... Ah, Kagoshima-senpai... and Orino-senpai too... I see, so you broke the barrier for me... that’s good. I couldn’t do anything from the inside, it was really bothering me.”

Kurisuchan returned a faint voice. Her body was limp, her breath was shallow and short. Her face was pale.

“Whoah. You’re burning up... Orino-san, call an ambulance!”

“O-on it.”

“... I’m fine.”

Kurisuchan reached a hand towards Orino-san, blocking the report to 119.

“I just used a bit too much magic... I tried every spell I could to break the barrier, and wasted quite a bit... the doctors here won’t be able to do anything but... I really am fine. If I rest a bit...”

She muttered incoherently as she closed her eyes. For a moment I panicked, but noticing a sleeper’s breath leak from her lips, I gave a sigh of relief.

“Shat should we do... she said the hospital’s no good so, should we let her rest in my house for now...”

When I turned towards Orino-san,

“... Magic... barrier, and spell...?”

Her mind had stopped on all the words I ignored.

My house was a standard two story, and I lived there alone. This was the first time I ever thought it better that my parents weren’t there. Just what sort of ruckus would they have made if I took home a debilitated young girl?

“How’s Kurisuchan doing?”

When I climbed the stairs with a first-aid-kit and towel in hand, I ran into Orino-san on her way out from my room.

“Hmm, she’s still in pain, but she’s calmed down.”

“I see...”

While I hesitated a bit, I tucked Kurisuchan in to my bed. I had the option of my mother's bed (my father's bed was not an option), it hadn't been used for a while, so the futon was gathering dust in the closet. I couldn't keep a patient waiting while I made the bed.

"... Huh? Orino-san, why are you holding your bag?"

I said, noting the bag in her hands. She didn't have to carry it around, she couldn't just leave it in my room. Hmm? In the first place, why was she leaving? Could it be she was already going home? It was getting late, so if she really had to...

"... You ask why I have my bag?"

Orino-san said in a low voice, patting the bag a few times.

"Because I can't leave these in the same room as a patient!"

As she yelled with a reddened face, she forcefully pulled the bag open. Inside it was... yeah, well, they were so-called erotica. Five, no six indecent covers were crammed tightly into the bag.

"Orino-san... do you always carry those around with you...?"

Learning an unexpected side of Orino-san, I was filled with concern.

"Ah, but... yeah. Your secrets safe with me. Yeah. That's right. Women have interest in that sort of thing as well."

"Wha!? Y-you're wrong! Look, take a good look at this!"

"Take a good look!? At that book!? What's gotten into you, Orino-san!?"

"Aah, god! Just take a look at it already!"

She grabbed my head, and thrust it into the bag filled with porn mags. It was embarrassing, but I had no choice but to look them over as ordered. Huh?

For some reason, I had a recollection of all of them...

"Wait, these are mine!"

C-crap!

I forgot to put those away!

Whoah! That wasn't the right time to say, "This is my room, so just go in. I'll go

get some towels and ice!”

A classmate (female) just cleaned up my porn.

When even my mom’s never put it away before.

“Putting it under the bed is one thing, but they were just normally strewn around the center of the room...”

No, I mean...

A man hides his porn out of fear his family might find it, so I have no reason to do so while I live alone, and wait, when a boy lives alone eight to nine out of ten cases, it’ll turn out like this!

Or so I wanted to give an excuse, but Orino-san glared at me with anger and a maiden’s embarrassment flushed all over her face, so I couldn’t say a thing.

“Now look here, Kagoshima-kun. I won’t tell you it’s bad to look at this sort of thing, but it’s real troubling to me if you...”

“Stop! Please don’t be kind!”

It was truly painful to be scolded in a big sister tone.

It would be easier if she just stretched out my cheeks.

“Good grief... well, now Kurisuchan won’t have to see them, so rest at ease. I got the place all cleaned up.”

“... Thanks for that... but it’s amazing you were able to clean it that fast. I thought it quite a mess in there, but how did you manage?”

When I asked, Orino-san mortifyingly clenched her fist.

“..... You’re a real piece of work, making me use it for such a stupid...”

She muttered resentfully under her breath. I couldn’t quite catch what she said, but I got the feeling she said something along the lines of, ‘I’ve cut yet another worthless thing’.

Hah, a large sigh came from her mouth.

“Though I’m a little relieved.”

And this time, she sent me a malicious grin.

“So Kagoshima, you’re a proper boy, I see.”

“U-urgh...”

I grumbled at her teasings.

I mean, I still read Corocoro comics, and when I read boy's magazines in-store, I'm a coward who hesitates when there's a pinup girl on the cover, but even so, I'm an honest-to-goodness man.

"Hmm. So you like this kind of thing."

"Stop, time out! Give it a rest, Orino-san! I'm really sorry!"

As she began checking over them one by one, I lowered my head with all my might. I was already at my wit's end. Orino-san shrugged her shoulders.

"Then you'd better hide these properly."

She said, handing me the port. I immediately brought them into my father's room, and while it was orthodox, I shoved them under the bed before returning to my room.

"So anyways, Kagoshima-kun."

Orino-san said in front of the door. She changed gears to a serious tone.

"I want to wipe down Kurisuchan's body, so could you stay out for a while?"

"Yeah, go ahead. Kurisuchan was sweating quite a bit. Yeah, I get it."

I nodded and handed her the towel and other medical supplies I brought.

"No peeping, okay?"

"I know."

"Do you really? With all that porn strewn about?"

Erk, she was still dragging that one on? I got the feeling she's keep teasing me as long as I stayed there, so I swiftly proceeded down the stairs. From behind, I heard the click of a door shut.

"Now then. With that, I don't think Kagoshima-kun will be in for a while, Kurisuchan."

"Thank you. I'm really sorry, having you help out with this."

"Don't worry about it. Even so, magic, is it... I still can't believe it."

"Hey, if you want to take it there, you're also... I was shocked. Though it's not on Kagurai-senpai's level."

"Kagurai-senpai is still just my guess. It's a guess, rather a hunch, perhaps? Well,

whatever the case, that much is about right for us. We've all got our own circumstance."

"... As I thought, we've all got our appearance to keep up."

"Right. Some people just get it..."

"Seriously, I had a faint... ah, sorry, Orino-senpai. That card's a little crooked."

I got the feeling the two of them were discussing something in my room, but it was mostly drown out by the sound of my feet on the stairs.

Now then, I should make her some porridge.

"Kurisuchan. Egg, or apricot? Which sort of porridge do you want?"

"Kyaah—!"

"Why are you coming in, Kagoshima-kun!?"

"I'm sorry!"

"Urgh, Kagoshima-senpai you pervert!"

"I told you I'm wiping her body!"

"I mean, I thought you would be done by now..."

"I just started!"

"Then what were you doing all this time?"

"That's... whatever! Just get out already, you pervert!"

"G-got it... I really am sorry, Kurisuchan."

"Urgh... I like simple porridge without anything in it."

"... Understood."

And so I was in the process of making porridge.

Not covered up by eggs or fruit, a porridge using only the taste of white rice.

Yes. It's time for me to show my stuff.

To a self-proclaimed whiz in the kitchen like me, this is a battle I can't afford to lose.

Um... we're out of salt. Then I'll have to use sugar. They look the same, so it'll work itself out. Wash the rice as thoroughly as usual, ah, we're out of Joy. Then I'll have to use shampoo. Wash it all out, shove it all into a frying pan, cook in oil and orange juice, and put in this and that as a secret ingredient, cook well together, and I'm sure it'll come out with porridge.

"... What is this smell?"

When I turned, I saw Orino-san coming down the stairs. She was wincing, holding her nose as if enduring a foreign scent.

“Ah, how’s Kurisuchan doing?”

“She’s sleeping comfortably but... more importantly, Kagoshima-kun, what are you doing?”

“Making porridge.”

“...”

Silently snatching away the frying pan in my hands, she discarded all its contents into the trash.

“What do you think you’re doing to my porridge!?”

“Such purple porridge does not, and shall not exist in this world... move for a second, I’ll put something together.”

She stole everything from me. My position, my apron. With accustomed motions, she equipped the apron and fastened her hair into one with a hair tie. Seeing her uniform motions, I secretly pumped my fist.

Yes, how should I put it, it got to me.

A woman who can cook. I was filled with an excessive urge to marry her.

“Hey, where’s the rice cooker?”

“Rice cooker? What’s that?”

When I tilted my head, she glared with dreadful eyes.

“Why do you have rice but no rice cooker!? How do you usually eat it!?”

“Just normally. Eat it as is as a snack, and put it in milk to eat it like cereal.”

“...”

“Of course, I properly wash it before eating it. With detergent and everything.”

“... I can kinda get why someone would be charmed by a woman who can’t cook, but a man who can’t has no appeal whatsoever...”

A man who can’t cook? Who was she referring to?

A wrinkle on her brow, Orino-san briskly began to cook.

“Hey, do you have a pot?”

“In that cupboard. I mail ordered the latest pressure cooker the other day.”

“... Pearls before swine.”

Orino-san smoothly washed the rice with nothing but water, taking out the earthenware pot she found in the back of the cupboard (Porridge tastes better in an earthen pot, apparently), pouring the rice in and boiling it.

“Kagoshima-kun, what do you usually eat? As I recall, you said you cook for yourself, right?”

“I exercise my creativity every day! It’s an improv with no scenario. A recipe-less wonderland. Even I don’t know what I’m fully capable of. Yes, every day truly is a box of surprises!”

“... Pretentious.”

“Well, I usually come out with something tasty.”

“This is my first time meeting a taste-deaf person.”

“How rude. Whatever I eat is tasty, that’s all.”

“That’s what the world calls taste-deaf.”

“Meh.”

Orino-san was sharper-tongued than I remembered her. I got the feeling she wasn’t insulting me, and was just saying the right thing, but that was surely my persecution complex.

Seeing Orino-san cook in the kitchen, she gave off a familiar warmth, and just seeing her soothed my soul.

She continued boiling the pot a few minutes. Tasting it a few times along the way, she tuned the flavor with various seasonings, finally adding minced green onion to complete the dish. Thankfully, she even made a portion for me. Kurisuchan’s was patient-made, and mine was for normal consumption, she said, but I couldn’t tell the difference.

We sat across the table from one another, I parted the gleaming grains of rice with a Chinese spoon and led it into my mouth.

Whoah, it’s delicious.”

“Thank you. Though being praised by someone who calls everything delicious doesn’t make me happy.”

“Harsh,” I let the spoon take its round trip between my mouth and the bowl as I gave a bitter smile. “But I think I’m actually better off this way.”

“What do you mean?”

“For example, the gourmand has too-developed taste buds, he won’t find

anything tasty unless it's extra-high-class. And then you have someone taste-deaf who can see everything as delicious. If you ask which one is happier, wouldn't it have to be the latter?"

"I see. I get what you're saying."

But, Orino-san raised her eyebrows.

"... You mean it's happier to be an idiot? Completely separated, unattached to the essence, the ugliness of the world, are you trying to say an imbecile will be happier."

"I know it doesn't sound good, but that's a true statement..."

Orino-san's tone was strangely heavy, overpowering me.

"Ignorance is a bliss, is what you want to say..."

The colors of sorrow gradually revealed themselves over Orino-san's face. As if she was trying to endure her sadness, she bit her lip.

"Orino... san?"

"... I should get home."

I could only watch as Orino-san swiftly prepared to leave.

In the end, Kurisuchan stayed the night. For a high school boy, it was a situation where one's tensions would have no choice but to rise. However, when I looked at her, with a slight fever remaining, I couldn't think the slightest strange thought. It's not like we were sleeping in the same room. I decided to sleep in my father's room next door.

"... Hm?"

My eyes opened to a strange voice in the middle of the night.

'Well I'm glad to see you're doing your best, Clear.'

"Yeah. I'm getting by, mama."

'I really caused you some trouble. It's all because I let the enemy get it away.'

"It's fine. I got the school to treat it as a story abroad, and I always did want to pay a visit to this world."

'That's good. And so? How's the world your papa was born and raised in.'

“... In spring, when I had just arrived, a lot of things confused me, but I’ve gotten quite accustomed to it. Both this world and that one aren’t very different at the root.”

‘Hmmm. You mean?’

“There are good people, there are bad people. Whether there are witches or not... no matter the world, the people don’t change.”

‘Oh my, when you’re just my daughter, you’re saying some wise things there. Back when I was your age, I was running riot, not a thought in my head.’

“You taught me by bad example.”

‘Someone’s learned to talk... but your right. You really don’t take after me. Meek and ladylike, you really are like your papa.’

“... I visited papa’s grave the other day.”

‘I see. Then you finally got to meet him.’

“Yeah...”

‘... Your papa, see. He was quite the wimp. Timid and cautious, a coward. He was always pissing the hell out of me.’

“But when it came down to it, he was reliable, a passionate man, right? You’ve told me again and again. You really love papa, don’t you mama?”

‘Shut it. Your cool papa went and protected me in that battle of Togahr Ghoul—no, he protected you in my tummy and died.’

“... It’s because of that incident that papa lost his life, and mama was driven out of the temple. It usually wouldn’t be strange if they called you a hero, but they keep giving you all the grunt work, the dirty work.”

‘It’s fine. Status, and fame, I never really cared for it. Your papa and I, we just protected what we wanted to protect. That’s—all there is to it.’

“... Yeah.”

“Well then, it’s about time we get to the main issue.”

“Eh? There’s the main issue? Knowing you, I thought you just set up a connection to kill time.”

‘Clear—come home.’

“... Eh?”

‘The enemy you’re chasing—the Red Crow’s finally entered the temple’s sights. They don’t want the world to start wondering why they’re taking so long to deal with what should be a small bandit troupe. That’s why they’re putting together

a force to sent to that world all at once.'

"They can't..."

'In short, there's no work left for a student like you. That's why you should come home already... I'm sorry, I made you clean up my mess. I should've just gone there myself, but when the temple drove me out, they deprived me of the right to move worlds.'

"B-but... I don't want to leave it to the temple's people. Those people don't care about this world at all. Even at Togahr Ghoul... it's because you didn't like the temple's decision that you and papa fought together..."

'... Clear, the reason you care for that world is because you're a half-blood. Over here, a majority of people hold that world in contempt. The evils born from the witch hunts they carried out in the middle ages still remain as firmly rooted as ever.'

"I know that, but..."

'If you leave it to their subjugation force, the Red Crow will be brought in in no time. Well, perhaps a city or two will be caught in the crossfire, but that's a so-called noble sacrifice.'

"..."

'Just come home, Clear. You don't have to become like us. There should be a better way for you to live out your life.'

"I-I don't want to!"

'... Clear.'

"I value this world and that one the same... in school, you know, I met some really nice upperclassmen. They saved me today. They made me think this world can be warm too. Hey mama, do you ever regret fighting alongside papa? You don't do you? I can tell. I'm your little girl, mama."

'...'

"No matter the world, the people don't change. That's why I want to protect them both. Even if one becomes a sacrifice for the other's peace, it won't make me happy in the slightest. I'm papa and mama's daughter. Even if the world doesn't accept it, my papa and mama will always be amazing!"

'... Fufufufu.'

"Eh? Mama...?"

'Ahahahahahaha! So it's come to that. You really are my daughter.'

“Huh?”

‘I knew you’d say that. That’s why I moved some pieces in the temple, and made the subjugation force never happen. Fufufu. Even like this, I’ve still got a few connections around. Just goes to show there are still people in the temple who’ll listen.’

‘Oh mama! You were testing me!’

‘That’s right. Only a parent has a right to test their child.’

“Urgh...”

‘As I thought, you really take after your papa. When it comes down to it, the way you get passionate is just like him. Fufu. When you find a man, make sure he’s a wild type like me, and I guarantee you’ll get along wonderfully.’

‘You think... Hmm, what boys do I know? If I had to say, senpai’s the peaceful sort...’

“Hm? What was that?”

“N-no, it’s nothing!”

‘I see... Clear. You live as you want. You can follow my lead. You can choose a different path. Your mama... and your papa will always be on your side. Now do your best. Creastia Crimson Cridende Christopher Chris.’

“Okay!”

A stream of words flowed through the single thin wall.
I pulled the cover over my head and sighed.

“... Kurisuchan’s one amazing sleepwalker.”

I couldn’t catch most of it, but it sounded like some grand drama between mother and child. She’s cute, so I’ll give it a pass. It might even be a charm point. A sleep talking girl... no, there’s really no way that’s happening. That’s a little too much to handle. It’ll definitely become annoying. But, even so, I wonder why my heart felt warmer.

Chapter 7: I Don't Know

The next morning, Kurisu-chan woke up before me.

“Ah, good morning, Kagoshima-senpai.”

As I descended the stairs, she flashed me a cheerful smile. She was standing in the kitchen, wearing an apron, cooking something.

“Good morning. How’s your body holding up?”

“I’m fine, thanks to you. You have my gratitude.”

“If you want to thank someone, say it to Orino-san. She even made the porridge.”

“You’re right. When I get to school, the first thing I’ll do is go straight up and thank her. That aside, I’ll make today’s breakfast, so you should just take it easy.”

“You will? Then I guess I’ll leave it to you.”

“I definitely didn’t hear about your lack of cooking skills from Orino-senpai.”

“... I don’t think you had to emphasize that point.”

Orino-san sure is harsh.

And wait, so my cooking was bad? I never had any opportunities to compare it to anyone, so I never knew. One can never learn their own worth, lest they compare it to another’s; I’m sure it’s that sort of philosophical question.

“But my mom did teach me...”

I sat at the table and watched over Kurisu-chan. Compared to Orino-san she was a little awkward, but that was also adorable. The way she seemed to be doing her best at something she wasn’t used to was wonderful.

I found myself really wanting a little sister like that. I wonder if I should ask my parents to get baby making. Those two still get along ridiculously well. Dad’s sixty-five, but he said he’s still in active service.

“It’s finished. Rice and miso soup. Fried eggs and sliced salmon as a side dish. I’ve properly studied the food here.”

It seems Orino-san set the rice to cook before she left. Hmhmhm. Which

means, that round machine over there is the item called a rice cooker. I never knew.

“Let’s eat.”

“Yeah, let’s eat... Hm? Kurisu-chan? This fried egg is yellow, are you sure it’s alright to eat?”

“... Kagoshima-senpai, what color are the eggs you usually eat?”

“Ah. The salmon’s great. Kurisu-chan, did you know? Salmon, see, its body is this red, but it’s actually a white-fleshed fish. The reason its body is red is because of the organic pigment it gets from the crustacean it eats. That’s also why salmon roe is red.”

“... I have just experienced first-hand the difference between knowledge and skill. Someone with nothing but knowledge can’t make a good meal, I see...”

As we continued our fun, lighthearted breakfast, the intercom rang. The visitor was Orino-san.

“What is it, so early in the morning?”

“I came with food. I can’t let Kurisu-chan eat anything Kagoshima-kun made, after all.”

She said as she raised the bags in both her hands. And I was being cast as an untrustworthy or rather unreliable seed of doubt.

“Ah, Kurisu-chan. I see you’re already up on your feet.”

“Thanks to you. I’m really thankful.”

“It’s fine. But more importantly that over there. Did you make it?”

“... Yes, you gave me ample warning.”

“I’m glad you understood.”

“... It really is something, isn’t it.”

“... Yes, it really is.”

The two spoke in whispers, making sure I couldn’t hear. I felt a little alienated.

“But when I went and bought ingredients, it looks like they’re going to be wasted.”

“In that case, let’s make something together. I want to learn cooking from you, Orino-senpai. That porridge was delicious.”

“Sure, I don’t see why not.”

“Ah, then I’ll also...”

Say what? Was the face they sent me. I’m sure that was the face someone would make when asked to teach the English language to a chimpanzee. Their kindness with how they discussed how to put me down without hurting me was painful, I stealthily left the kitchen and began watching the morning news in the living room.

Oh, good for me. Taurus ranks second luckiest today.

With the power of a man’s pride, I somehow crammed down that breakfast that had gone as far as to include pasta and omurice. After changing into uniform, the three of us commuted to school together.

No, what’s with me having a flower in each hand? If Kagurai-senpai were her, it’d be perfect. Orino-san and Kurisu-chan walked a step ahead of me, blooming in conversation. Ever since the previous night, I got the feeling the distance between those two was suddenly contracting. When I watched the two of them, I brightened up as well.

But I wonder why.

Ever since last night, Orino-san’s expression was faintly dark. Even when she laughed, she looked somewhat sorrowful.

When Kurisu-chan and Kagurai-senpai held up bright faces as if they had found the paths they were to tread in life, it looked like Orino-san alone was still lost. I could only hope it was my usual imagination.

At that moment, tension raced across Kurisu-chan’s happily conversing face.

“... Eh? This magic is... the person who locked me in a barrier yesterday...”

Saying things as incomprehensible as ever,

“I-I’m sorry. I have to go ahead!”

She apologetically lowered her head and raced off at a breakneck pace.

“... I wonder what could have happened.”

The question still lingering, I tilted my head and looked to the side.

“You really don’t know, do you.”

Orino-san looked at me with scornful eyes.
Dumbfounded, and as if she had given up.

“Ah, um... what do you mean by that?”
“... Sorry. I’m going ahead.”

Covering her face, she walked off with fast feet. As if my legs were sewn to the ground, I couldn’t move. I couldn’t take... a single step.

You really don’t know, do you.

Again and again, Orino-san’s words raced around my head.

Don’t know? So I don’t know? Know what? What don’t I know? I wonder why I don’t know anything. Almost as if a curse or something was placed on me, I couldn’t notice.

I mean, I mean, I mean... there’s no way it was. No way it could be.

I mean, that person...

Something was coiled around the inside of my head. It became a chain to obstruct the development of my thoughts.

When I wanted to accept... it would reject.

Wait, what?

“... No. No, no. That’s idiotic.”

There’s no way heroes of justice exist.

I know I shouldn’t be the one to say, it, but I think I have quite an optimistic personality. I make sure not to think about anything deeply, and it doesn’t really bother me if I leave what I don’t know as an unknown. In my personal relations, I’m careful not to do anything that’ll make them hate me, and I never think to forcefully probe into their secrets.

Because that person taught me that sort of man was the coolest.

“Kagurai-senpai... isn’t here. I’m coming in.”

Lunch break, I dropped by the ComClub room alone.

Orino-san was constantly emitting a hard-to-approach aura, and I was unable to strike up conversation with her. I had made her angry, or rather fed up with

me... if that was all, it would be fine. The problem was that I couldn't tell what Orino-san was thinking in the slightest.

I got a feeling it couldn't just be written off as being dense.

The filter in my head taking on the name of common sense had grown firm enough to call abnormal.

“... Oh? It's Gakuta-kun.”

Gakuta-kun had been placed atop the table. It seemed that Kagurai-senpai had forgotten him. He seemed to be her favorite, so I was sure she'd take him home with her.

I picked up Gakuta-kun, and closely inspected his face.

Something was different than usual.

Almost as if his personality data had been plugged out, he made a face that didn't give off any vitality. No, he was a stuffed animal, so it was only obvious he wouldn't have any to begin with. I tried equipping him on my hand. Of course, I didn't try any terrible dirty jokes like Kagurai-senpai.

‘Hey there. I'm Gakuta!’

I tried forcing out a high voice, but it really was hard. I reaffirmed how amazing Kagurai-senpai must be.

‘Akira-kun. Why the long face? What happened to you?’

“Something just a little bit sad happened. Will you hear me out, Gakuta-kun?”

‘Of course I will. I'll always be your friend, Akira-kun.’

... This is actually quite embarrassing. I'm surprised that senpai was able to do something so lonely. Oh, but since I was already at it, I should try doing it some more. Perhaps it would melt away some of the twists of my heart a bit.

“The truth is, I had a fight with a friend... maybe it wasn't big enough to call a fight. We just tried to reach each other and fell short... maybe we would be better off having a fight.”

‘You mean you want to be close enough to fight?’

“The opposite. I want our relationship to be bad enough we can go at each other's throats. I get the feeling the fact it can't become a fight is the real problem.”

‘That's too complicated, I don't get what you're saying.’

“Haha. It’s fine like that. I don’t really get it either. But you see, it’s just this feeling I have, but I don’t think me and Orino-san will ever be able to fight.”

‘Why do you think so?’

“Me aside, I think that Orino-san has something she can never tell me.”

‘And what’s that?’

“... I don’t know.”

‘What’s up with that?’

“Nothing I can do about what I don’t know. But I also get the feeling I’m not supposed to know, so maybe we’re better off like this. Orino-san probably—also Kurisu-chan, and Kagurai-senpai too, there’s something they’re hiding from me, maybe...”

‘What!? For the reputed dullard Akira-kun to say such a thing, that’s the real shocker.’

“I’m surprised too. But I just can’t do it. No matter how I try, my thoughts never move forward. The plot never advances. I get the feeling I’m not supposed to notice any more. Something like a curse is tying me up.”

‘Aren’t you imagining it? Akira-kun, writing it off as your imagination is supposed to be your specialty. What happened to you?’

“... You’re right. I’m sure it’s my imagination. Don’t mind it, don’t notice, I’m sure it’s nothing at all. That’s how I decided I would live my life.”

‘You’re talking about that day, aren’t you.’

“Right. That day... hey, you make it sound deep, but it really wasn’t anything special.”

‘The day of first love, and first broken hearts.’

“Ah, don’t say that. You sure are a naughty one, Gakuta-kun.”

‘Sorry, sorry.’

“No, you’re not getting off for that one.”

‘Whah. Akira-kun got angry. Run away!’

“Wait right there, I’m not letting you go!”

‘Kyah. Someone save me.’

“Ahaha. Just you wait, you little scamp.”

Orino-san was standing in the doorway.

I-I was being watched!?
I was seen playing around with a stuffed animal on my hand!
I'm done for as a human being!

"... I can't stand watching anymore..."

Orino-san was crying a torrent. Her hands pressed to the ground, she shed rough tears.

"I'm sorry... I, I just got a little irritable... and I ended up taking it out on you... I never thought it would break your sanity to such an extent..."

"Whoah! Don't apologize, Orino-san! You're wrong! I was just imitating Kagurai-senpai and practicing some ventriloquism."

I understood how Kagurai-senpai must feel.
This is painful!

"That person isn't a ventril... never mind. Ah... the tears won't stop..."
"Stop, don't look at me as if I'm some pitiful sop! I'm going to be infected with the tears!"
"It's all my fault. I'm sorry. So cheer up, I'm begging you."
"We managed to make up, but it's not making me happy!"

Well.
Of course, it's not as if such a comedy sketch could actually reconcile our relationship, and even after a week, it remained awkward between us. We'd exchange greetings, we'd chat, but it wasn't fun like it used to be. It was also something different from having distance between us. More so the opposite.
Orino-san was trying to close the gap that pulled us apart... I think.
To step over the comfortable line that was once there, just another step, she was coming towards me. Or perhaps, she was pulling me over to her side. I got around to thinking of it like that.
Confusion and hesitation oozed from her body.
Shown the expression of someone who had no idea what to do, I didn't know what to do myself.

It was a week I couldn't get excited over.

It felt awkward with Orino-san, Kagurai-senpai hadn't returned yet, and I wasn't close enough with Kurisu-chan to intentionally hang out with her, so I only met her on occasion.

Lately, it had been so fun to be with those three, I had forgotten how the past me ever spent his days. And now I longed for the girls who colored the boring world.

“... I wasn't supposed to hate boredom.”

With classes over, I walked alone down the crimson-dyed residential district. Once again, Orino-san said her 'stomach hurt' and left early. I thought I'd send her a message, but I never managed to.

Human relations really do have an irksome side.

If you had to experience meeting and loss to get a true taste of loneliness, perhaps it would be best to be lonely from the start. If you're lonely to begin with, you can get it over with never noticing you were lonely at all.

It was too late, though.

I had learned a fun that wasn't lonely.

That's why the current situation was so tiresome.

Is there a cosplaying Kurisu-chan somewhere around here, I thought as I took every detour I could on the way back. Passing down roads I'd never walked before, entering shops I'd never been to, visiting the abandoned school to check up on the bench I smashed the other day, meaninglessly fiddling with the misanga on my right arm.

As I took it easy like that on my way home,

“... Eh?”

My feet stopped before Gentle Breeze Park.

At the entrance, a signboard reading 'TO BE DEMOLISHED NO ENTRY' was set up.

“For real...”

It was quite a disappointment. The pain really does pile up.

That was a place of memories.

No longer able to stand around, I ignored the sign and infiltrated the park.

There was 'Do Not Use' tape plastered all over the swings, the jungle gym, the seesaw. I could no longer play on them.

That was excessively harsh. I was driven on by an urge to tear off all the tape, but I managed to contain myself. Even if I did it, it'd just tack a sense of guilt over everything else.

"..."

Even when down in the dumps, the human body has its needs. I entered the park's bathroom and did my business.

When I left the bathroom, Orino-san was in front of the jungle gym.

She was dressed in the movie costume I'd seen once before, that somewhat erotic suit.

As she blankly stared at the sky above-while I hesitated a bit-I mustered my courage to let out a cheerful voice.

"Fancy meeting you here."

"Eh?"

Orino-san made a face taken by surprise. That was a reaction as if she hadn't expected me to call out at all.

"... Ah, I see," she accepted something, continuing her monologue. "So this park is outside of Saijou-kun's territory... that's a downer. His telepathy makes it so no one can see me, so I was able to use psychokinesis to get myself back with some piece of mind."

"... Eh? Psychokinesis?"

"I flew through the sky. Whoosh, just like that. It feels nice to just let it all out sometimes. So while I was at it, I spotted this park, and used it as a landing site. You said it was your park of memories, so..."

"... Umm, you're talking about a movie, right?"

"Right."

Orino-san looked down, her mouth curving in self-derision.

"I'm talking about a movie."

Do you want to sit down? I pointed at a nearby bench. With a space of around thirty centimeters between us, we sat side by side.

“Is your stomach alright?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“That’s good. Ah, come to think of it, how’s your grandma doing? I’m hoping my old folks live long and prosper.”

“... You’re right.”

I wonder why. Whenever I talked, Orino-san made a pained face. As if she was containing her irritation, she gripped and strangled the thigh portion of her suit.

“Hey. Do you still think the world is boring?”

She suddenly tossed the question to me. While I was perplexed, I managed an answer.

“Yes. Well...”

That’s right. The world is boring. That’s what I’ve thought all my life. Only commonplace things ever happen, it’s a world that isn’t dramatic. I mean, back then, that person told me.

“So it’s boring... eh.”

Orino-san’s mouth formed a smile. But the only thing smiling was her mouth, and her eyes weren’t in the slightest. It was a smile of harsh self-deprecation.

“If a world where nothing happens is boring, then what is a hero of justice supposed to do? Are they supposed to snatch away everyone’s enjoyment? Unknown to all, just going off and taking care of the bad guys? I thought I was quite serious about it but... was I making a mistake?”

“O-Orino-san...?”

“An everyday life is boring, you’re charmed by the ordinary... what’s with that? To be blunt, that’s an insult you know. An injustice to all the people working on the world’s underside. You don’t notice how many sacrifices your life stands on...”

“.....”

“I wanted to be as close to an ordinary high school girl as I could, I pushed myself, I even became class rep...”

As she bit her lower lip, Orino-san’s shoulders shook. Her anger and sadness were overflowing from her slender body.

“We’re not doing our best to make the world boring!”

It was a tear-laced scream

“I... we, all of us... do it because we have things we want to protect...”

“... What are you talking about?”

I couldn’t tell in the slightest why Orino-san was growing so heated.
I didn’t know.

“Why can’t you get it...”

Despair floated across Orino-san’s face. As if to cry out, ‘save me’, a fleeting expression. An intense sense of guilt welled up, but I hadn’t the slightest what I should do with it. Some deep portion of my heart rejected the very notion of understanding.

What is this?

Why... why can’t I understand anything?

“That’s enough.”

Standing from the bench, Orino-san ran off. There were tears in the corners of her eyes, and I found myself giving chase. I had no idea what I was supposed to do, but I chased.

“Orino-san wait! Please wait!”

“Stop following me!”

The moment I tried to grasp her arm, Orino-san turned towards me and directed her palm my way.

Crush.

As if I was being pushed down by a giant unseeable hand, I crumbled onto the ground. I couldn’t move a single finger. An invisible power was suppressing me.

“Ah, sor...”

Orino-san mouthed an apology, but along the way she turned her back to me. Released from that strange oppression I stood and chased her... what was that just now? Did my legs get tangled up? Did I get a fainting spell? No, more importantly, Orino-san. Orino-san was running at a considerable pace. It didn’t

look like I could catch up, but even so, I frantically kicked at the ground.

Just ahead, Orino-san turned a corner.

“Kyah! Why did Kagurai-senpai suddenly appear when I turned the corner!?”
“Uwah!? Just when I get back from the future, Orino-san suddenly...!”

I heard two overlapping screams. It seems she bumped into Kagurai-senpai. When she got back from her parents’ house, I wonder. Well whatever. This is my chance. Hurry.

“H-huh? Kagurai-senpai, that thing in your hand is kinda acting up.”
“Hm? ... Nooooooooo! My T4D Card!”
“E-eh? What’s that supposed to be?”
“When time trav—aah, I don’t have time to explain that... this is bad. I just arrived, so the time axis hasn’t been stabilized yet. If that impact broke the T4D Card then...”
“Eeeh!? W-what’s going to happen!”
“Grab onto me, Orino! In another few seconds, we’ll be jumped somewhere. There’s no stopping it!”

“W-wha...”
“Stay close, or you’ll be left in the rifts of time!”
“Nonononono”
“Here it comes!”
“Whyyyyy!”

Right after Orino-san’s scream, I finally managed to turn the corner. But neither Orino-san nor Kagurai-senpai were anywhere to be found. Before my eyes was a dark bluish haze as if space-time had been warped, but after I rubbed my eyes and looked again, there was nothing. Apparently I was just seeing things.

“Where could they have gone...”

I was at a loss, simply standing on the spot.

Chapter 8: First Proposal

Three days later and Orino-san and Kagurai-senpai were still unaccounted for. I called again and again, but they were out of range all the way. Even when I tried searching where they might be, they weren't anywhere. The call came from Kirako-san when I was laid out on the house sofa, flipping through Corocoro. Of course, it was in regards to Orino-san.

'You really don't know Orino's whereabouts?'
"I'm telling you, I don't know. I tried searching for her too."
'I wouldn't be worried if it was just her phone, but... there's no response from her transmitter. What in the hell could've happened to her...'

Transmitter. She was probably referring to the GPS in her phone.

"Maybe she's somewhere out of range?"
'Fool! There's no such thing as out of range for the transmitters we use. No matter where she is in the world, we'll pick it up.'
"Then her phone could be broken."
'The transmitter is embedded type, she's been directly chipped in the brain. That's why the only way it can break is if Orino dies.'
"Umm, you're talking about a movie, right Kirako-san?"
'... Yeah, that's right. This is all the movie's setting, and my name is Kirako like some idol from the Showa Era.'
(TL: Showa Era, 1926-1989)

Kssh, I heard a grating static, as if her phone was raising a cry for help.

'... Good grief, just what does Orino like about this idiot...'
"Eh? Did you say something?"
'Nothing you need to know.'

She said flippantly before clicking her tongue in displeasure.

'Really, where did she run off to, that Orino...'

Kirako-san seemed irritated the whole way. But perhaps it was just the flipside of panic, I thought. That's why,

“I’m sure she’s fine. Unlike me, Orino-san’s a reliable one.”

I made an effort to speak in a cheerful tone. While I was trying to be tactful towards Kirako-san, more than anything, I wanted to convince myself she was fine.

‘Reliable, huh... I wonder.’

But Kirako replied with cynicism.

‘That girl looks like she’s got a grip, but she’s got a few screws loose where you wouldn’t expect them. When she’s mature, she’s childish, or maybe... anyways, she’s the type who tries to take everything on herself.’

I had a hunch that was the case.

Really just a hunch, though.

‘No complaints about her abilities, but her mind’s unstable in the field...’

“I see, so she does fine in rehearsals, but when it comes to the actual shoot, she gets too nervous to exhibit her real abilities.”

‘... You’re an idiot.’

She just straight up called me an idiot. H-huh? I was trying to sharply analyze her words, so why?

“Please sugarcoat it a bit, Kirako-san.”

Some more grating sounds, more cries from the phone.

‘... Don’t call me that name.’

“Eh? But if you don’t want me to call you your real name, what am I supposed to... ah, could it be you want me to call you a nickname? Man, feels like we’ve suddenly got all friendly with each other. Hmm... then how about Kirarin—”

Kssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

I heard a sound as if the phone was destroyed to a point one small step before it would be rendered useless.

“W-what’s wrong, Kirarin!”

‘... Bastard, next time we meet, you’d better remember this.’

Her killing intent even carried over the phone line. I didn’t really get it, but it

did seem I made her angry.

‘Anyways, if you find anything out, give me a call. Got that?’

“Yes. Understood.”

When I had gotten to the Under—the call was one-sidedly cut off.

Hmmm. I don’t really get Kirako-san as a person. I thought she hated me, but she suddenly asked me to call her by nickname, and despite that, when I called her that nickname, she suddenly snapped.

“... I’m sure the movie schedule is tight, and she’s desperate to find her actress.”

After reaching a conclusion without thinking too hard, I contacted Kurisu-chan. A while back, when I was searching for Orino-san to deliver her card, I recalled how Kurisu-chan told me where she was. I felt like I was grasping at straws. It’s not like Kurisu-chan could do magic divinations or anything, so I wasn’t expecting too much.

When I called her, ‘Leave it to me,’ I got an energetic reply, and we were to meet in Gentle Breeze Park in an hour.

But the result wasn’t too favorable.

Like last time, she drew a magic circle-esque shape on the ground, and placed a cookbook she borrowed from Orino-san in the center, “Ah, a swimsuit-clad beautiful girl in a place like this!” she said, and I looked away once more.

“Huh? Why...”

When I returned my attention, Kurisu-chan was unsatisfactorily folding her arms.

“... That’s strange. Orino-senpai doesn’t exist in this world. Could it be she found a way to mine...” but she soon hit on something. “Ah, come to think of it, she disappeared together with Kagurai-senpai. In that case, they might be fine. I’m sure they were sent to a different time...”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“Urgh... I’m sorry. You can’t hear it from my mouth. But I think they’ll return eventually, so we can only wait.”

“I see. But it seems the movie club Orino-san helps out with is troubled. I think the filming’s been put on hold... you think they’ll be fine?”

When I said that, Kurisu-chan's expression stiffened. "Orino-senpai's movie club... wait, don't tell me," she leaked before showing a bitter smile.

"Even so, we can only wait. I'd do something if I could, but I don't think those fine ladies and gents will believe what I have to say, so there's nothing I can do."

"I see. So we can only wait."

I parted with Kurisu-chan and went straight home.
I collapsed on my own bed.

I wasn't particularly sleepy, but I felt like throwing it all away and going to sleep. No matter what hazy, cloudy feelings you might have, if you close your eyes, sleep will take you eventually.

I saw a dream. A dream of the past.
My place of memories—Gentle Breeze Park.
The first love and first heartbreak I experienced in my first year of elementary school.

Dad and mom always came home late, so I was always playing in the nearby gentle breeze park. I sometimes played with Daiki-kun and Yoshiko-chan, but lately, those two had gotten into video games, and they wouldn't play with me. That day, I had run away from my mom's incessant persuasion for me to learn the abacus. I stood in the middle of the park, closed my eyes, and unified my body and soul.

And snapping my eyes open, I cried out!

"Kamehameha—!"

Imagining chi escape from my hands, I fashioned both hands into an appropriate shape and thrust them forward. But no energy came out. Hmm. I wonder what I did wrong. Am I still lacking in training?

"Kamehameha! Kamehamehaa! Kame—"

I tried again and again, but it wouldn't come out. How strange. Could it be I don't have the talent? No, there's no way that's it. I'm sure I can do it. Even if

the spirit bomb and big bang attack are impossible, I should be able to do the Kamehameha.

I mean, even Yamcha pulled it off.

If Yamcha can do it, there's no way I can't.

I mean... it's Yamcha, right?

"Did I angle my hands wrong...?"

With repeat trial and error, I practiced again, and again and again.

Day after day, I would put my all into training.

Because I wanted to become a hero of justice when I grew up.

'You're already in first grade, and you're still saying that?' Daiki-kun teased me, but I was serious about becoming a hero.

They're definitely out there.

The reason no one knows they exist is because the hero of justice conceals his identity as he fights. I don't know the reason, but a hero of justice has to hide their identity.

I'd become a hero of justice and protect the world's peace.

For that sake, I'd need to at least be able to Kamehameha.

Now, do your best. If it's you, you can do it.

I mean, even Yamcha did it.

That's right. I'm sure I didn't build it up enough that time. This time let's give a bigger buildup. Roll out the words longer.

"Kwaaaaa~~~ Mweee~~~"

Ah. This feels right. My body's chi is gathering in the palm of my hand... I think.

"Fwaa~~~Mweee~~~"

I can do this!

Something's different from before!

"HaaAAAAAh!"

An explosion rang out!

“Whooooaah!”

That scared the heebie-jeebies out of me. I fell on my backside with all my might. An explosion occurred in the sandbox before my eyes, scattering sand all around to cover up my vision.

S-so I’ve finally done it...

As I shook for joy, the cloud of sand gradually faded, my vision became clear.

“Peh. Peh. God, what was that?”

In the center of the sandbox, there was a lady wearing a strange suit.

“W-ww...”

I ended up crying out in my surprise.

“When I tried shooting a Kamehameha, a lady came out—!”

What is this new technique!?

Amazing! Not even Goku can do that!

“Hac, hac, a sandpit? Just what’s going on in here...? Kagurai-senpai disappeared sometime along the way...”

Brushing off the sand on her bottom, the lady approached me as my legs had given out.

“Umm, I’m sorry for surprising you. Are you okay.”

She was a really pretty lady (and I did get the feeling I was into older women), and while it was embarrassing, I borrowed her hand.

The lady pulled me up, led me by the hand, and sat me down on a nearby bench.

“... I wonder what’s going on. It looks like I returned to Gentle Breeze Park, but there’s no tape on the playground, and it feels strangely new...”

“I think my special move summoned you from another world, lady.”

When I said it lively, the lady made an extremely troubled face.

“Umm, what did you say, little boy?”

“When I let out my chi, you were summoned in this park. Am I wrong?”

“Yeaah, unfortunately, I think that’s wrong. I just fell into the sandbox by coincidence.”

So that’s it, I was disappointed. As I thought, I’ve still got a long way to go.

“Hey, young boy, what’s your name.”

“It’s Akira. Kagoshima Akira.”

When I named myself, the lady opened her eyes wide.

“Oh... then what kanji do you write Akira with...?”

“Write out Emperor, read it as Akira!”

I say some cool things, don’t I.

Emperor, that might be the next big thing.

“... Ah, I see. So that’s how it is...” the lady made a soft smile as if she understood everything... yeah. “Looks like Kagurai-senpais dragged me into something crazy... Yep. Sure enough, you do like him...”

I couldn’t understand anything the lady was saying.

“Hey, Akira-kun. What are you doing in this park alone?”

“Training.”

Hmhmm, I stuck out my chest. “Huh?” The lady tilted her head before, “Wow, how cute, so Akira-kun had a time like this too...” she writhed.

“I’m serious about this. And yet, mom and dad and Daiki-kun and Yoshiko-chan say its stupid and I should stop.”

“Akira-kun, what are you training for?”

“It’s to become a hero of justice. When I grow up, I’m going to become a hero of justice and fight to protect the peace of the world.”

“I see. Then you must do your best.”

The lady gave a warm smile and pat me on the head. It tickled a bit. Unlike everyone else, the lady didn’t make fun of my story. That made me extremely happy.

“Akira-kun, do you think there are heroes of justice out there?”

“Yeah. They’re definitely there. Everyone just doesn’t know, and there are really loads of them. They secretly take out all the aliens and monsters!”

“Fufu. How the times have changed...”

“But lady, it’s still a mystery to me, but why does a hero of justice have to hide their identity. When I see them on TV, they always do that. They’re sometimes found out along the way, but they usually stay hidden away.”

Like Ultraman and Kamen Rider. The super sentai ones... yeah, I think you could say they were hiding. Thought I get the feeling everyone asserts their individuality a bit too hard out of costume.

“Mom says it’s to ‘prevent societal chaos’ but is that true?”

“Right. That’s also a part of it,” she laughed knowingly. “But that’s not the biggest reason.”

“Then what is it?”

“That’s you see, to not let anyone worry.”

The lady gave a gentle, but powerful smile.

“The hero of justice has a family and friends too... a person they like, plenty of people they treasure. They don’t want to let those people worry about them, so they hide who they are.”

“But then everyone will think that hero of justice is a strange person who disappears whenever there’s trouble. Is that alright?”

“It’s fine. That’s how it should be. It’s fine if they’re never rewarded.”

They were strangely heavy words. I got the feeling they stuck fast in my chest.

“A hero of justice doesn’t want applause or thanks, nothing like that. They just want to protect the everyday life. Not to settle an incident after it’s occurred, it’s best to resolve it all before everyone knows there’s an incident.”

It was gradually getting hard to follow. I concentrated and perked my ears.

“They’d be really happy if everyone supported them and cheered them on, but that’s not ideal. The ideal is for the fact they fought to remain unnoticed. They don’t want anyone to feel indebted... They want everyone to laugh without knowing a thing.”

She wasn’t turned towards me, it was as if the lady spoke to convince herself.

“Hiding it gets painful and lonely at times... but, that’s right, just what was I even irritated about... I thought I knew this would happen from the very start...

you know, Akira-kun?”

“Yes?”

“Not being rewarded... is a hero’s reward.”

I didn’t understand.

I wanted to say all sorts of things back, but the lady was making a smile as if she had accepted it all herself, so I couldn’t bring myself to ask.

“So you see, when everyone lives in peace without knowing the danger to the world and the earth’s pinches, that’s when they’re happiest.”

“Umm. You mean, they’re hourly employees with terrible working conditions and little to no pay?”

When I said that, the lady’s shoulders dropped.

“Where did you learn those words...”

“Dad goes on about it every day when he drinks from his bottle. It looks like his work isn’t going good these days. The recession is scary.”

“... I heard something I shouldn’t have.”

“So when I grow up, I’m going to become a hero of justice and take down this recession monster.”

“What a good kid! Oh snap, he’s adorable!”

“I said, so he bought me a transformation belt. Just as planned.”

“I take that back!”

Gazing at the lady holding her head, I thought back over my future.

“I think I’ll stop trying to be a hero of justice. It sounds harder than I thought, and mom told me that becoming a seeval sahvant will let me live a more-stable life-style.”

“What a realistic mother... oh, but I think that’s a good thing. In the first place, there’s no way you could become a hero of justice, Akira-kun.”

I went sullen. “Why’s that?” I asked.

There, the lady gave a grin I had seen that face in a drama the other day, it was the ‘Tell a kind white lie for a child’s sake’ smile.

“Because heroes of justice don’t exist in this world.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Rather, first off, there aren’t any evil organizations. So there aren’t any

heroes. There definitely aren't any people protecting the underside of the world. There aren't any psychics or witches, or cybersoldiers in this world."
"So it's true..."

I went against my mother, but for some reason, I didn't feel an urge to go against this lady.

"Well, in the million-to-one chance they do exist, I doubt you'll ever find one in your lifetime. Those sorts of people are reeeaaally good at hiding their identity."

I wanted to retort 'liar'. I wonder why. But honestly, I didn't care about heroes of justice anymore. My head was full of something else.
It was—love.

"Lady."
"Yes. What is it?"
"Please marry me."

She slipped.
It was a fall so splendid, you wouldn't get better results with a banana.

"Eh... Eeeeh? U-um, are you serious?"
"I'm serious."

There's no way I'd say such a thing as a joke.
"Umm...ahaha. No, I'm happy, I'm really happy, but..... if possible, I'd like you to say that in another ten years, no, what am I even saying..."

The lady fell into chaos. She seemed to be flustered by my sudden proposal. Alright. This is where you hammer in the point. Dad said, "Your mother, you see, it all works out once you push her down," so I'm sure this is the important part.

Now it's time to whisper those sweet words I learned from dad!

"To your beautiful eyes, a toast☆"
"Scary!"
"I don't know aaaanything about that!"
"About what!?"
"I'll put it on! I'll properly use a rubber, okay!"

“!?”

... Perhaps I’m better off not trusting dad when he’s drunk.

“Akira-kun.”

The lady straightened herself out and spoke with a serious face.

“I’m sorry. I can’t marry you.”

I was dumped.

... Dumped.

..... Dumped.

“... Uu... hig .Uwaaaaaaaaaahn!”

“He’s crying for real!?”

My heart was gripped in unanticipated sorrow. So love was something so fleeting and painful? I know I’m not supposed to cry, but the tears won’t stop...

“Aah... I’m really sorry. But there are some things that just can’t happen. Don’t cry...”

“Uu... hic... hey, why is it no good?”

“Don’t look at me with those puppy dog eyes... umm, see, it’s the difference in age. No, we’re in the same year, but anyways, it’s impossible for now...”

“As long as there’s love, age is just a number.”

“I thought you’d say that...”

“My dad and mom are thirty years apart.”

“That’s really something!”

“Mom told me, ‘your dad’s turning fifty five this year, but he’s still in active duty’. Hey, what does active duty mean?”

“N-no idea...”

Her cheeks turning red as a tomato, the lady hung her head. And still with a red face, she put her hands in front of her chest, tapping her index fingers together.

“... But we’ve still only just met, right? In the future, wait, I know a bit about it, but anyways, you don’t know anything about me, so... umm... well, just what part about me do you like?”

She took some fleeting sidelong glances at me to probe my reactions. Her words were cut up, she seemed terribly nervous.

I answered honestly.

“Your huge breasts.”

She punched me.

She pressed her fist down on top of my head.

“I can’t marry a man who’d say something like that.”

Muuuh. She gave off an atmosphere as if she wasn’t going to budge.

“Could it be you already have someone else you like?”

When I nonchalantly asked, the lady’s expression stiffened. But pff, she soon made a gentle smile.

“Yes. I do.”

“What sort of person”

“A ridiculously dense idiot.”

Taking in a deep breath, the lady lightly tapered her lips.

“Anyways, he’s a man who never notices anything. No matter how obvious the hints are, it’s like he looks over it all. First thing’s first, he’s definitely never going to be a detective.”

“Hmmm. But you like that hopeless man?”

“... Yes. I do.”

She narrowed her eyes, bashfully shying back just a little.

“I’m my classes representative, but I have a lot of other things to do, and I can’t do the work more often than not. And yet, he’s never made a reluctant face, he believed all the excuses I give, he even did my share each time.”

The lady went on with a wonderful smile.

“He’s just kinda a really warm man. Whenever it’s over, I think that I want to return to his side, he’s just got this strange broadmindedness. I guess you could say its soothing.”

“Then are you going to marry that man? In that case, I’ll completely give up.”

When I said that, the lady packed her utterances with “Erk”s. “A child’s innocence really is scary,” she let out a light sigh.

“I wonder. I don’t think that dense man has noticed my feelings in the slightest, after all. And just a moment ago, we had a bit of a fight.”

“A fight?”

“Yeah. But it was all my fault. He properly keeps his territory and never steps beyond it, but I got irritated and stepped into his space. Why do I have to be the one going through all the troubles, I grew resentful, and slammed it all into him.”

The lady closed her eyes to criticize herself.

“But talking to you, Akira-kun. I finally remembered. It looks like I’ve let myself be pampered by him too much. I never wanted him to sympathize or share in my pains. I just wanted him to be the everyday I could return to.”

There, she rested her hand on my head.

“I’m sorry.”

“? Why are you apologizing to me?”

“Just because. Right. Ten years from now, try to remember that sorry.”

How strange, I thought as I sealed the words away in my heart’s time capsule. And I asked what had been bothering me the whole time.

“Does that man believe in heroes of justice.”

“Nope. He doesn’t believe in the slightest.”

“I see. Ah, but you said that’s what makes the hero of justice happy, right?”

“Yes. Right. That’s right... so I want him to stay like that.”

Her expression as she said that belonged to a so-called expression of a maiden in love. It seems she had completely fallen for the man. No helping it. I’ll have to swallow my tears and pulled back.

“Find some happiness, lady.”

“Thank you. Akira-kun, you do your best too. In around ten years.”

At the moment, from behind me, I heard a byooooon, as it time and space were warping. When I turned around, there was a tall, slender, beautiful woman. She was wearing some futuristic clothes I couldn’t tell were stylish or

not.

“So this is where you ended up, Orino.”

“Ah, Kagurai-senpai. What took you.”

“I searched all over for you. Hmm? Who’s that kid with the impudent eyes.”

“My name is Kagoshima Akira. You write it as Emperor and read it Akira.”

When I gave a cool self-introduction, the model-looking lady was startled.

“Oy. Could it be like that, Orino?”

“Yes. It seems it’s like that. Kagoshima-senpai.”

With curious eyes, the tall lady gazed over me. It was a little embarrassing.

“I see. So this child grows into that empty-headed simpleton.”

It was a line as if she knew how I would look when I grew up.

“Whatever the case. We’re leaving, Orino.”

On those words, the lady who was there first calmly nodded.

“Eh? You’re going away?”

I felt really lonely. I got the feeling this was the last time I’d ever see these ladies.

“It’s fine. We’ll definitely meet again.”

The two ladies turned their backs to me and walked off. Not wanting to part just like that, I ran after.

But a sudden gust blew, blowing leaves and sand into the air, and hiding the ladies from my sight. It was an unnatural wind as if someone had used superpowers.

“Don’t forget, Akira-kun.”

The lady’s voice was all I could hear.

“There are no heroes of justice in the world. If you ever see someone who looks the part, please don’t notice for them. Become a man of large caliber who can write off all abnormalities as your imagination.”

The wind died down, my vision cleared.
And no one was there.

“... They were some pretty ladies.”

Strangely, I didn't feel as lonely as I thought I'd be.

When I thought we'd definitely never meet, I got the feeling we'd definitely see each other again. Was this what you called a contradiction?

From that day forth, I stopped training. One of the reasons was that my mother bought me a game console, but the biggest reason was because I met those ladies.

There are no heroes of justice in the world. The grand incidents from manga and games don't happen, a boring day to day is what makes the world. I learned it as I grew, and became an adult. My conversation with the lady entangled me like a chain, become a curse 'to never notice' and ruling my mentality.

But even if I say that, it wasn't an unpleasant curse at all.

Anyways, I know that heroes of justice don't exist.

And I thought I wanted to be the sort of man the lady liked.

A warm and tolerant, thickheaded man.

The sort of man who could write off anything that happened as 'his imagination'. Because at that time, I truly did love that lady.

Finally waking from my dream, I raised my body off the bed.

“... I was one crazy kid.”

My body shook with embarrassment. Who the hell proposes to someone they're meeting for the first time?

“I wonder what that lady's doing now.”

Honestly, I couldn't remember her face anymore. But the numerous words we exchanged were still vivid in my memory, and each one of them constructed my personality. I wonder if I managed to become a man the lady could love?

“... I kinda get the feeling I have.”

I got the feeling excessively so. Though that was surely my imagination. My phone vibrated on top of the desk. I got a text from Orino-san. She said she wanted me to come to Gentle Breeze Park immediately. I draped the bag I bought the other day over my shoulder and bounded off at once.

Under a reddening sky. Orino-san stood at the entrance to the park. Still wearing the suit that was her movie costume, she felt like she hadn't changed one bit from when I saw her three days ago.

"It's been a while."

"Ah, I see. So it's been a while."

It didn't feel like a while to me, said Orino-san with a smile. An extremely nostalgic smile that I liked. Strangely, the awkwardness was gone. When it's not like anything had happened, I felt a refreshing sensation as if everything had been resolved. I'm sorry... the lady's word from ten years ago revived in my head.

"Orino."

I had to confirm it.

"Am I fine, staying like this?"

"Yes, you're fine the way you are."

At that instant-and I didn't know why, but-I got the feeling everything got through. We laughed together. The air that flowed between us held a humanly feel to it.

"Ah, right," I reached a hand into my bag, "The truth is—"

"I've been looking for you, Orino."

A husky voice resounded from my back, the slow flow of time suddenly accelerated.

“K-Kugayama-san.”

Orino-san raised her voice. When I turned, there was Kirako-san behind me.

“Umm, I’m really sorry. I was...”

“I’ll hear your excuses later. We found their hideout. It’s a run-down middle school nearby. The situation’s grim, we need to hurry and take them in. My teleport can take us in five jumps.”

“Y-yes ma’am.”

Orino-san grasped Kirako-san’s hand. I abruptly clasped the hand she had left.

“Please wait, Kirako-san. Just a little longer, I have to—”

“Sorry, but.”

For a moment, Kirako-san’s hand blurred.

And a sensation as if my neck was severed...

“—I don’t have time to tag along with your jokes.”

“K-Kirako-san...”

“... That’s right, my name is Hoshizora Kirako. That’s why I’ll make you see stars.”

That wasn’t actually very witty, I thought as my consciousness gently fell into darkness.

Chapter 9: Climax Scene

When I opened my eyes, I was sleeping on a bench in Gentle Breeze Park. I raised my body and shook my head. I tried touching my head but it didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. I could tell first-hand it had been a skillful chop aimed solely at robbing me of my consciousness.

"The filming must be way behind schedule..."

I muttered as I raised my face to the sinking evening sun. I checked the time with my phone. It seems I was out for around thirty minutes.

"... I have to go."

As I recall, the place was that abandoned school.

I hid my body behind the school gate to peer in, only to find them smack dab in the middle of filming. Orino stood right in the middle of the schoolyard, facing a mop-headed man. The man looked unhealthily thin, but the glint in his eyes was sharp. He was a man with that wild thing going.

A great number of people were collapsed around. Black-clad people, and civilian-clad ones, their clothes were all torn here and there, exposed wounds on their bodies. Among them, I spotted Kirako-san. In that depiction of carnage, she was desperately trying to muster the power to stand, but her body wouldn't listen to what she was telling it. Or so it looked.

If I had to guess the situation—

Orino-san's party and the terrorists group clashed. They kept pushing the enemy into a corner until they were only one step away, but then the headliner mop=head made his appearance. Both Kirako-san and her comrades were defeated, leaving Orino-san as the only one to fight.

—That sort of scene, eh? That which they call the climax.

I couldn't get in the way of filming, so I decided to observe from the gate's shadow.

"For Christ's sake... move... dammit..."

“It’s useless, Kugayama. I dislocated both your shoulders and hips. That’s not a predicament you can overcome with force of will alone. At present, your body is physically unable to move.”

The mop-head informed her with a flat voice. Calm and collected would be the perfect way to describe it.

“Kugayama!”

“Don’t come here! Concentrate on what’s in front of you! Don’t show him any openings!”

“G-got it.”

Gritting her teeth in anguish, Orino-san stared at the enemy before her. Immediately after, the mop head thrust out his right hand. As if to match that, Orino-san stuck both her hands out front. The pressure in the air increased, the atmosphere trembled.

“Ah... Haaaah!”

“... Nnueaaa!”

Orino-san and the mop head, they each let out a roar. Almost as if one side was using their psychokinesis to suppress the other’s. As it two invisible powers were meeting head on, there was a peculiar sense of oppression. After a few seconds passed, both lowered their hands, spitting out deep breaths. They soon returned to battle-ready stances.

“Splendid, Orino.”

The mop head said, collecting his breath in order.

“To perfectly see through the scope of my psychokinesis, and cover it to create a clash of powers of all things. That’s a high-class technique that would require the most delicate control. I came to crush you with all my power. But if it was blocked, then that would mean in range, in output and control. In every category, my psychokinesis has been defeated.”

Temporarily cutting his words, he narrowed his narrow eyes even further.

“You’ve grown, Orino.”

Those were the words of a master, recognizing the growth of their disciple. It looked to me like genuine praise. And yet, Orino-san's expression didn't lighten. When she had completely superseded her opponent's ability, why?

"That just sounds like sarcasm to me... Masaki-san..."

The mop head's role was apparently named Masaki.

"I see. That's a shame. But as you know—"

Masaki-san faintly raised the corners of his mouth.

"I never was a special like you—I'm a general."

I recalled the movie setting I had heard from Orino-san.

A special focused all their efforts on a single ability, while a general spread it over multiple.

Which means, the single ability Orino-san had concentrated on and forged was on the same level as one of the many abilities the man possessed.

What a hopeless situation.

... Amazing, she's got no hopes of victory. How's she going to beat him?

I guess it's time for the scriptwriter to show their mettle.

"Even as my psychokinesis clashes with yours, I'll be able to use a different power. Do you think you have any chance?"

"..."

"Isn't that enough, Orino? Come and join our side."

Anguish floated over Masaki-san's face.

"It's not like I want to hurt you guys. The reason I just make Kugayama-san immobile without killing here was because I wanted her to move under my command. Just how long do you all plan on acting like the facility's pets?"

"Why did you do it, Masaki-kun!?"

Orino-san ignored the question and cried.

Desperately, and painfully.

"For so long, you used to fight alongside all of us. You were the one who taught me how to use my psychokinesis..."

"I just noticed. The facility and the country's bigshots only see us psychics as

mere lab rats. It's strange, isn't it? When they call us their progeny, proclaim us superior beings, why must we whittle our bodies away to serve the common man?"

His tone didn't change, but his words increased in intensity.

"Ability users should be allowed to have a normal life as well. They should be able to grasp simple happiness. In order to make sure there are no more victims like us, I'll crush the facility. That is my objective."

"But your means are too forceful! There's no way it's alright to drag in uninvolved innocents!"

"That's just it, Orino. What does it mean to be uninvolved? When we all live in the same world, same system, same rules isn't it strange that we can label people as involved and uninvolved? Why must psychics alone be forced to work for the sake of their peace? Why must we be pushed to work behind the curtains?"

"That's..."

"I'm done with having the role of hero forced onto me. I'll never forgive the facility who made us play the clown. I'm sure you've felt it as well, Orino."

The question he spat out muffled Orino-san's mouth. The fact she couldn't give an immediate answer meant that she more or less had an understanding of Masaki-san's feelings. And apparently, the facility wasn't fully a harmonious organization.

Orino-san lightly bit her lip, before speaking in a pitying tone.

"It's your sister, isn't it..."

A wrinkle was etched into Masaki-san's brow. As if he was killing off his fluster.

"...Don't misunderstand. My reason isn't as petty as revenge for her. That girl was no more than the trigger to the gun. Sooner or later, I'd have chosen this path.."

One step, Masaki-san moved forward.

"I'll say it again, Orino. Work for me. Let's release the psychics together. You've had it with being the hero of justice, right?"

A slight silence. A frozen tension passed between the two.
But.
I only held a slight anxiety.
Of course, it was a movie, so I anticipated it would have a happy ending.
But that's not what I meant. Even if this was reality, I knew what Orino-san's response would be.

"No."

As I thought.
I secretly laughed in the shadows.

"I think I'm going to continue fighting as a hero, Masaki-san."
"... Why? Why don't you get it? Do you think the facility is a righteous existence?"
"The facility has nothing to do with it... even I started out cursing my fate. To throw it all away and become a normal girl, I don't know how many time's I've made a wish..... But!"

Orino-san took a strong step forward.

"Right now I'm thankful. Thankful that they gave me the power to fight."

Gazing at her own palm, she slowly clenched it.

"Isn't it fine? Sacrificing for the world? That's really kickass. If you don't have innate talent, you can't use powers, so that means we must have been chosen by god. And hey, since we were chosen, why not give it a go? Whether it's sacrifice or victim."

"... You're saying you give up!?"

The collected Masaki-san bared his emotions for the first time.

"If you accept everything, then... the tragedy, the despair, you'll give up and say that's just your fate!?"

"Yes, that's right."

Orino-san said it so easily it sounded out of place.

"Whatever the case, what you're doing right now is no different than a child's tantrum!"

“... Orino. Are you fine with that? No matter what pain we go through, those folks in the world will be laughing without caring to know. When my little sister died...”

“And what about it!?”

A fighting spirit revived in Orino-san’s eyes.

“Risking your life so everyone can laugh without knowing is what it means to be a hero of justice!”

I was so happy it hurt my chest.

Even if it was a movie, Orino-san’s words resounded deep in my heart.

I would stay like this, she would be like that.

I could tell that for us, that was the best.

“... So it’s a difference in view.”

Masaki-san unpleasantly spat out. Crick, he twisted his neck.

“I’ve already gone beyond the point of no return.”

Orino-san instantly took her stance. With the speed of a bullet, Masaki-san charged forth.

Fist to fist, a battering battle began.

I watched over it with some relief.

I mean, this is a movie.

With that last line, it was practically set that what followed would be Orino-san’s chance to show off. All that was left was for Masaki-san to be defeated. While there was supposed to be an insurmountable difference in powers, well, that part can arbitrarily be written off as the awakening of a dormant power, or becoming Super Orino-san or something like that.

I mean, this is a movie.

But.

“KyaaAAAH!”

Orino-san rolled along the ground. Masaki-san produced a ball of fire as tall as he was from his hand. That was likely the ability called pyrokinesis. As expected of a general. He can do anything.

Orino-san rolled her body to dodge the fireball he tossed, avoiding it by a hair’s

margin. Recovering stance, she turned her eyes to a nearby withered flowerbed. The bricks around the bed floated just a few centimeters. But they instantly fell back.

“Damn...”

“It’s useless. Your psychokinesis no longer has any meaning.”

If it was just psychokinesis, then by a narrow margin, Orino-san was stronger than Masaki-san.

But the moment Orino-san’s hundred was put up against Masaki-san’s ninety-five, she would receive ninety-five percent resistance, and Orino-san would only be left with five percent to use.

To put it simply, I think it was something like that.

With her ability mostly sealed off, Orino-san raced along the ground avoiding Masaki-san’s balls of fire. Unable to fully evade them, she ate damage to the arm and back.

As I witnessed the scene, an unease was brought to my chest.

Just how long were they going to drag it on? It was about time for Orino-san to go through a convenient awakening, wasn’t it?

I mean, this was a movie.

Orino-san bent over her body, cast psychokinesis on herself to tackle—at least she tried, but that instant, Masaki-san appeared above her head as if he had teleported. And Just like that, he smashed Orino-san into the ground.

Masaki-san raised a hand. Answering that, four old iron construction rods in a corner of the schoolyard floated up and assailed Orino-san.

Orino-san used her power in the reverse, just barely stopping their movements. If it was in pure power, Orino-san was the stronger.

But Masaki-san’s ability wasn’t just one.

A flame ball he threw as if to hide in the shadow of the rods... collided with Orino-san.

“Kuh, AAAAAAH!”

A shrill scream. Even if I knew it was an act, I didn’t want to hear.

An act?

Wait a minute. Is this really an act...

No matter how I look at it, even if it’s a movie, isn’t this strange...

“Looks like your drive suit saved you from a fatal blow.”

Masaki-san said plainly.

“Are you going to continue, Orino?”

“... Of, course.”

“I see... then there’s nothing I can do for you.”

Masaki-san stuck a hand in his pocket and took out a device that looked like a remote control. He pointed it at the school building and pressed a button.

“OoowwwwwwwWWwWWw!”

Then came a cry that made me want to shut my ears. Orino-san held her head, writhing on the ground.

“My head is... it hurts... what did you...”

“An electromagnetic wave that only effects the brain of a special. I developed a technology I brought with me from the lab and made something of my own. When you stepped into enemy territory, you should’ve been wary of something like this.”

“... That can’t be...”

“The brain circuits of a special and general are wired fundamentally different. It might be simple to understand if I said a special runs in series, while a general runs in parallel. The wave that’s being emitted only has an effect on direct connections. In this situation, it is structurally impossible for you to use your psychic abilities.”

“... Urgh, ah. It hurts, erk...”

Forget abilities, it looked like she could barely move from the pain. No. this is the complete opposite, why are the enemies coming out with a new weapon? Their odds of victory that were nonexistent to begin with had grown even slimmer.

It’s a movie, so isn’t it about time... some convenient new power...

Huh—could it possibly be—this—isn’t – a – movie?

“Orino, give up.”

“I-I wo... n’t.”

Masaki-san furrowed his brow and approached her.

“Excuse me!”

By the time I noticed it, I had leapt from the gate’s shadow.

“Please stop it...”

... What the hell was I doing?

This was a movie, so why was I getting in the way of filming?

But I couldn’t watch Orino-san’s pained face anymore.

“Who are you?”

In regards to the uninvited quest, Masaki-san took on a displeased attitude. Of course he was, I mean the camera was rolling.

“Ah, umm. I apologize for interfering in the middle of filming, I’m Orino-san’s classmate and—”

The world turned on its head. In the blink of an eye, I was fastened to the earth. “Ghah!” Slammed on my back, all the air in my lungs was spat out. Masaki-san had grasped me by the neck and slammed me down. When did he even get over here, I wonder.

“No, I really do feel sorry for getting in the way, but... you don’t have to be so angry.”

“Oy, Orino. Who’s this?”

Ignoring me, Masaki-san asked Orino while she was still holding her head.

“Please stop! Kagoshima-kun has nothing to do with it.”

“That so.”

A quiet not, and with eyes cold enough to raise goosebumps, he glared at me.

“But as I said before, there’s no such thing as an uninvolved person. I’ll deal with this man later.”

Whoah! They’re actually keeping it rolling!?

So it’s like an amusement park hero show that encourages the kids to join in? I see.

I'm sure the setting has Orino-san awaken a sleeping power to save a friend in a pinch. Thinking that, I glanced at Orino-san—

“Stop it, ple...as... oww!”

She was shaking on her knees, trying to stand again and again. But every time, she would hold her head and fall back. At the end, she finally hit the ground face-first.

They're still.

They're still dragging it out.

For how long, how far—

“Quit it with the futile resistance, Orino. If you push yourself too hard, you'll be left handicapped.”

They were words of genuine concern for Orino-san's health. It seems that if possible, Masaki-san wanted an unharmed, fully usable Orino-san under his control.

And his treatment of people without use,

“Good grief, I feel sorry for Orino-san. I should get rid of you quick.”

Was far too inorganic.

A shiver ran down my spine. The murderous malice only a seasoned warrior who had surmounted countless battles could emit, I could sense it in the back of his eyes. Feeling a primal instinctive fear, I tried to run.

But the power pinning my neck was far too strong, and no matter how I struggled, he wouldn't let go. Even so, I wouldn't get up. My sense of crisis as a living being moved my body. Perhaps irritated by my resistance, On top of my arm, Masaki-san restrained my right hand. At that moment, because of his violent clasp...

The misanga on my right arm—came off.

And...

And then...

Nothing happened.

“...”

That's it?

I wonder what it is, this disappointed feeling.

Strangely, I got the feeling something amazing would happen when the bracelet came off. Like a magical rampage or something, going bang and resolving all my problems.

Well, not like anything like that could ever happen.

“Hah...”

“You sure look calm.”

Looking down on me as my tension drained all at once, Masaki-san scowled. This is bad. I slackened all on my own, but the situation wasn't resolved. At this rate, I'll be killed... maybe? As a movie character, at least.

“G-gueh...”

The force on my neck increased.

Crap, my consciousness is...

A few seconds and I'll be out cold, and around that time, something hit Masaki-san's temple with a thwap. Thanks to that, his strangling hand weakened. The item rolling around was a small pebble one might find anywhere.

“... Do you think that's all it takes to resist me, Orino?”

Half fed-up, Masaki-san, gazed at the pebble that hit him.

“Just because you can't use your power, you resort to throwing pebbles? That's quite a regression...”

The moment he shifted his eyes from the pebble to Orino-san, Masaki halted his words. In front of Orino-san- while she was still writhing on the ground-was her outstretched index finger pointed this direction. She was lying face down.

That wasn't the posture of someone who threw something. Then that pebble

was.

“... Why can you use your power?”

Masaki said with a grim face. Still a pained look on her face, Orino-san gave a cynical laugh.

“... Looks like I can do it if I try... though that pebble was my... limit...”

Hearing those words, oh, so it really is just a movie, I thought. I mean, when he just said it was impossible, Orino-san managed to use a convenient power.

“... Hmph. Well so be it. The equipment is still in development. I guess these irregularities are possible.”

He said uninterestedly as he gazed at the school building.

“Whatever the case, it looks like I’ll have to seal you more thoroughly, Orino.”

With his left hand still on my neck, he lazily lifted his right hand. Accompanying his movements, the bench in the corner of the schoolyard floated into the air.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get off with two fractured ankles.”

When he lowered his hand, the bench raced through the air at an incredible speed.

“_”

Orino-san closed her eyes in resolution. It seems she no longer had the power to escape.

I—started sweating.

Is this going to be alright?

I mean, that bench is...

“What!?”

Both Orino-san and Masaki-san raised their voices. The bench thrown with psychokinesis, just before it hit Orino-san, snapped straight in the center. Aaah.

So it broke after all.

After I broke it, I arbitrarily just stuck it back together. I repaired it to a level

where it wouldn't be a problem just sitting on it, but I doubt it could withstand such violent wire action.

So that bench was part of the movie set...

I've done something bad.

"I'm sorry. When I was playing around the other day, I broke the bench... I didn't know it was part of the movie set. Um, real sorry about that."

As my sense of guilt welled up, I honestly apologized.

"Umm... if you could just put that footage after the credits as part of the blooper reel, I'm sure that bench will be happy..."

"... How idiotic. You think luck on this level will save you?"

Masaki-san made a displeased, let's settle things here and now sort of face. What do I do? Looks like I really made him angry. Was it an expensive bench?

"Your situation hasn't changed."

Masaki-san lifted me up with one hand. My legs floated, kicked in the air. My neck bones supporting my full body's weight let off an ominous grating sound.

"Orino-san will submit, you will die. That's all there is."

"Guh, gah..."

"Stop it! I'm begging you, Masaki-san! I'm begging..."

Orino-san shed tears as she pleaded. Still holding her head with one hand, she crawled her way towards us.

She was... trying to save me.

This is strange. This whole time, why was she so desperate?

This is supposed to be a movie.

I mean, there's no way psychics can exist.

That's what the lady told me.

"... Ur-urgh... g-gah."

In the midst of my breaths growing painful, I faintly thought.

It was just as Masaki-san said a moment ago.

The situation hadn't changed at all.

The movie's filming was going on without a hitch, it seemed. The blooper I caused was no hindrance at all.

... This movie club has some crazy ad libs.

“Kagoshima-kun! Nooooooo!”

Ah, Orino-san was looking at me.

With a heartbreaking face.

That’s a shame.

When I leapt out here because I didn’t want to see that look on her face. Is this situation a movie or reality, I don’t really know anymore, but instead of those trivial problems, I just wanted Orino-san to smile.

It seems the blooper I caused had only delayed the movie’s conclusion, Orino-san’s defeat, my death by a few seconds.

Good grief, that was a waste of time.

But...

“Kagoshima-senpai!”

I guess it wasn’t pointless.

Right after a lisping voice resounded, Masaki-san was sent flying by someone’s kick. I fell flat onto the ground. When I raised my head, there was Kurisu-chan in her robe, a body-height staff in her hand.

“Are you alright? When I saw you from above, you were suddenly on the brink of death. You really surprised me there.”

“Gough, cough. K-Kurisu-chan... why are you here?”

“Because you cut your misanga. It’s my spell. If you break it, I’ll be able to tell. And so, I hopped on my staff, and flew all the way here. Glad it looks like I made it in time.”

Kurisu-chan deftly felt up my right arm, mainly focusing around the shoulder.

“Ah, looks like your alright now. It’s been fully reattached. My magic has also turned to mana and returned to the planet’s cycle I see... yep, it’s a complete recovery.”

No idea what she was talking about.

Was I ever even injured.

“Ah, that’s right. Orino-senpai is also...”

Kurisu-chan unsteadily sprinted over to Orino-san on the ground.

“I see... her wounds are mainly burns, it seems. Don’t worry about it. Treating burns happens to be my specialty, you’ll be right as rain in no time.”

“... T-thank... you... but.”

“Ah, it’s fine. As thanks for the other day. I don’t know the specifics, but..... well, I get the general idea.”

“Yeah... but even if you treat my wounds, my ability...”

“We also have that covered.”

Kurisu-chan smiled triumphantly. At that moment, my cellphone vibrated. It was from Kagurai-senpai. When I pressed the answer button, the screen shifted, and Kagurai-senpai’s face appeared.

‘Hey, Kagoshima.’

“Eh? Why is Kagurai-senpai on my cellphone?”

‘This is a video call.’

Huh? Did my phone come with that function?

“No, but... why are there bear ears on your head? And it looks like your hair’s sparkling a bit, and you’re dressed funny, the background is pale blue, rather, I get the feeling your whole general appearance looks kinda like a CGI anime...”

‘Don’t sweat the small stuff. I hate that sort of man.’

Oh my. I wouldn’t want to be hated by Kagurai-senpai.

Alright. Let’s not sweat the small stuff.

“You work fast, Kagurai-senpai. I just sent a mail, and you literally arrived at the speed of light.”

‘Praising me won’t get you anything, Kurisu-chan. More importantly, how about it, Orino? Does your head still hurt?’

“Eh... ah, it doesn’t hurt. Why...”

‘It’s nothing. The equipment here had some decent security, but in the end, it’s a behind the times antique. No match for me. The fact it had internet connection was its undoing.’

Kurisu-chan changed something like a spell, enveloping Orino-san in a warm

light. Once the light vanished, the marks over her body were cleanly wiped away. I moved to Orino-san's side.

"Kagoshima-kun... why? Why did you come here?"

And there, I finally remembered why I had come.

With everything happening, I had completely forgotten my original objective.

I opened the bag hanging from my shoulder and took out a paper bag from within.

"I wanted to give this to you."

"...?"

Her face turned perplexed, but she accepted the bag, and took out its contents.

The stomach wrap I bought.

On the day we went to see a movie, I bought it while Orino-san had urgent business to attend to. A white background decorated with dandelion stalks. I wanted to choose something as cute as possible. For me to give her a surprise present, I wonder if I did something a bit embarrassing.

"... This is?"

When Orino-san asked with a shaking voice, I smiled in response.

"When filming the movie, it would be terrible if your stomach started hurting."

As I bashfully explained, Orino-san began crying roughly. "E-eeh?" When I fell into a fluster, she suddenly embraced me.

"H-huh? You like it that much...?"

"You really... you really are an idiot, Kagoshima-kun..."

There was something off about that 'idiot', and it was an 'idiot' that didn't feel bad at all.

"You think so? Am I an idiot?"

"Yes... you're an idiot."

"Alright. Then I'll do my best to work on that."

“... You don’t have to.”

The power pushed into my back strengthened. I wrapped my hands around to hold her slender back.

“Kagoshima-kun, you’re fine like that...”

“I see.”

I got the feeling time had stopped. This moment was far too comfortable.

“Hawawawa...” Kurisu-chan’s bright red face.

“A-ahem!” An intentional-sounding throat-clearing from Kagurai-senpai on the screen.

“” ...!””

We suddenly parted as if thrusting each other away.

Whoah... just what was I doing?

I was swept up by the atmosphere to embrace her, but...

‘Unfortunately, there’s a time and place for romcoms, Orino.’

Looking around on such sharp urgings, I saw on the side of the schoolyard, Masaki-san who’d been thrust away had gotten up, and was glaring at us with the face of a demon.

‘Orino, Kurisu.’ Kagurai-senpai on the screen looked at the two. ‘You may have noticed, but this man called Kagoshima is considerably dense.’

“That’s, well...”

“As I thought...”

The three of them looked at me disparagingly. It was kinda sad.

‘So just go at it with all you got. He probably won’t notice.’

At Kagurai-senpai’s grin, the two gave a large nod.

This strange sense of unity between them felt reliable enough to leave the fate of the world to.

“Hold onto this for me,” the stomach wrap was handed back to me. “I’ll end this in an instant.”

Orino-san burst off. Because that strange electromagnetic wave was gone, she was able to use her ability to its full potential. With explosive acceleration,

she closed in on Masaki-san.

“Oy, Orino. Who are those two?”

“Just some heroes of justice passing by, some temporary help. Kinda like silver and gold.”

“In that case... in the end, who’s the brat supposed to be?”

“... Isn’t it obvious? He’s bystander A.”

Exchanging two, three punches, both sides took distance. They both thrust their hands out. While they tried to activate psychokinesis, it cancelled out. As a general, Masaki-san could use other powers as well. The pyrokinesis he had used to torment Orino-san before. From his right hand, a bright-red flame appeared.

But that age was over.

“... A slight distortion to the wide-reaching world. Red, redder. Redder still—”

As if going through the motion of a dance, Kurisu-chan began twirling her staff round and round. After a few large swings, she forcefully stabbing it into the schoolyard.

“《Fire Lord’s Garden》”

From the part of the staff she pierced in, lines of light diffused and raced along the ground. They encompassed the campus from corner to corner, drawing a giant magic insignia like a crop circle.

“Identifying—usurping—absorbing.”

All Masaki-san’s fire was sucked into Kurisu-chan’s left hand. Shrinking down to the size of a golf-ball, the inferno was clenched in her small hand and made into her own power.

“W-what just...”

Towards a stupefied Masaki-san, Kurisu-chan gave a prideful smile.

“The magic circle I used in that other battle’s still here so I made good use of it. Right now, any fire used within this domain will come under my control.”

“It can’t be, you’re also a pyrokinetic...?”

“? Umm, I don’t know about this pyro stuff, but I won’t lose in a battle of fire. I

mean, I'm a witch of flames."

The battle was pretty much settled. If I had to guess from the contents of the battle, Masaki-san's main combat techniques were psychokinesis, pyrokinesis, and teleport. As well as that obstruction electromagnetic wave generator. The generator was decommissioned by Kagurai-senpai, his flame abilities were shut down by Kurisu-chan.

If it was just in psychokinesis, Orino-san had the slight advantage.

"Haaaaaaaah!"

At the end of a gale-raising intense offense and defense, Orino-san's fist with all her weight in it plunged deeply into Masaki-san's solar plexus. While he cried for pain, he didn't fall to his knees, somehow holding himself up.

Staying right where she was, Orino-san closed her eyes. She began concentrating her power. She was likely trying to use her psychokinesis directly on his body while still connected to him.

Twitch, twitch, Masaki-san's body began to shake.

But Masaki-san was also using his psychokinesis to resist.

"..."

It was extraordinarily plain to draw.

Regardless of how serious the ones undergoing it were, compared to that free-running battle from before, it couldn't help but feel lacking.

"... It's... over!"

The score was settled.

In a battle of psychokinetics, Orino-san had the edge.

Masaki-san was beaten to the ground, his arms put in a joint lock, his body pressed down.

"It's your loss, Masaki-san. From here on, we're going to take you to the facility."

Orino-san's victor's monologue caused his lips to curve down. But that curvature soon turned to a pleasant one.

"Naïve, Orino."

The next instant, he had disappeared from beneath her.

“Cra—”

“You should’ve put an anti-psychic electron lock on me when you had the chance.”

That triumphant voice came down from the heavens. When I looked up, a Masaki-san clad in the setting sun was standing on the school roof. Snap. Masaki-san still had his teleport. Orino-san no longer had the stamina to chase him. Kurisu-chan might be able to fly through the sky, but no movement speed could win against teleportation.

At the end of the end, he got away.

“Those helpers you invited were outside my expectations. I will accept this defeat, and you will let me get away.”

“If you accept your defeat, then come in with some pride. Masaki-san.”

The husky voice that suddenly sounded out.

On top of the roof, as if to droop over his back, someone was clinging to Masaki-san.

“Wha? Kugayama!”

Kirako-san’s sudden entry to the fray terribly flustered Masaki-san.

“Unfortunately, I’m a general like you. I can teleport.”

“This can’t be! I dislocated both your shoulders and hips! There’s no way you could move!”

“And I’m telling you, don’t make me say it again. I’m a general I can teleport, and I can use psychokinesis. Though neither of them are up at your level.”

“... Don’t tell me, Kugayama. You’re using Psychokinesis on your body.”

“You guessed it. I’m forcing my arms and legs to move.”

Meaning Kirako-san was using her mind to move her own body. Not with internal electric signals, but with pure willpower from the outside, making a marionette of her own body.

“B-but! If you do that, sure you could move, but... the pain shouldn’t change. The more you move, the more intense it’ll become!”

“No shit Sherlock. My whole body hurts like the dickens. It feels like my mind

might fly off at any second.”

Focusing my eyes, I could see a large quantity of sweat running down Kirako-san’s face. She was acting calm, but every time she moved her dislocated joints, a sharp pain ran through her body.

“That being the case, let’s get this over with already.”

Grabbing Masaki-san’s shoulders with both hands, she turned around his body to meet him face to face.

“Give it a rest. With four barely-functioning limbs, you think you can get out a decent attack? No matter how you manipulate your body with psychokinesis, you can’t exhibit much power with your level of ability...”

“Sorry but...”

After a deep breath, Kirako-san raised the corners of her lips, forming a wicked smile.

“You didn’t dislocate my neck.”

Bong, an impact as clear as the rung of a bell.
An incredible headbutt burst out.

Masaki-san showed the whites of his eyes, fully relinquishing his consciousness. His body went limp.

“Ah, crap.”

No longer able to support her wound-ridden body, Kirako-san fell from the roof alongside him.

This is bad, I thought as I leapt out—only for two figures to move far before me. Straddling her staff, taking off like a meteor, Kurisu-chan grabbed Masaaki-san’s hand.

Using her psychokinesis to slow the fall, Orino-san caught Kirako-san in her arms.

I gave a relieved breath.

‘Looks like it’s over.’

“Looks like it.”

I replied to the Kagurai-senpai on my phone, and sat on the spot.

I hadn't done a thing, yet I felt strangely tired.

To the side of my pitiful self came Orino-san and Kurisu-chan.

"Good work."

"Yeah."

Orino-san gave a vibrant smile. Her clothes were a mess, and her face was bruised and muddy, but her smile was so beautiful I might end up falling for it.

'Maan, that was a great movie. Right, Kurisu-chan?'

"You got it, Kagurai-senpai."

I stared fixatedly at the two leaking forced-sounding impressions.

"No, I'm sorry, but you can't fool me with that anymore. No matter how I look at it, that was downright bizarre."

There's no way that was a movie.

No matter where I looked, I couldn't see a camera. Orino-san's wounds looked very real. There were no wires for wire action. Kurisu-chan just plainly flew through the sky. Kagurai-senpai was streaming too smoothly for a video call. In the first place, you're not supposed to be able to physically see CGI on set with the naked eye.

Resolving myself, I asked.

"That wasn't a movie, was it... and Orino-san, and Kurisu-chan, and Kagurai-senpai, the three of you aren't normal people, I'm sure you're..."

"Huh? What are you talking about, Kagoshima-kun?"

But my seriousness greater than it had ever been was thrown to the wind by Orino-san's gleaming, mischievous smile. The other two made similar smiling faces.

'Are you half asleep?'

"You're reading too much manga."

"Does your stomach hurt or something?"

With three truly girly smiles, they exchanged some looks.

'Cyberwarriors from the distant future,'

"Witches from parallel worlds,"

“Psychics fighting under a research institute”

“””Don’t exist.”””

‘Do they?’

“Right?”

“You know.”

“.....”

Yeah... that’s right.

As I thought. There’s no way they exist.

Rather, when I looked at their joy-filled smiles, something like that stopped mattering to me. The ones in question were saying it, so what doesn’t exist, doesn’t exist.

I really can’t notice.

So I laugh without knowing a thing.

I’m sure... that’s how it should be.

“Ah.”

There, the question suddenly hit me.

“When is this movie going to screen?”

Epilogue

While it was a real shame, it seems the movie was scrapped. They even went and filmed an explosion scene for it, so what a pity that must have been. Well, the contents of the movie itself were full of issues, so I think it was inevitable. First off, it's unreal that they suddenly cast a layman like me as an extra. At least give me a script or something. I'm weak at improv.

Also, when it was supposed to be a story about psychics, they suddenly threw in a witch and cyberwarrior at the end, making a right mess of it all. That's what you call destroying the sense of world. You can't just keep throwing stuff at the wall until something sticks.

The finale was the final nail in the coffin.

A headbutt to end it... analyze it however you want, that's way too plain. It's a movie, so it needed some more amazing powers and things that go boom! to top it off.

Rather, why did Kirako-san get the final blow? That person's a side character. Overall, I could evaluate the production highly based on Orino's performance, but the scenario was a bust. It was fated for the dust bin.

Despite that, Orino didn't look down over it, so all's well with the world. I don't know why, but she looked even happier than before. According to her,

“Because of what happened to his sister, Masaki-san went on a long rampage. The way he was going, both his body and mind would collapse, so I'm glad we could stop him. It was probably a trigger that made him curse the world... he's really a good person, so I'm sure he'll get back on his feet someday—was the last scene, and where the movie was supposed to end.”

According to Kurisu-chan,

“I got all the remnants of the ‘Red Crow’ and successfully turned them in to the temple. My achievements were recognized, so I'll be continuing my training in this world. But the summoning ritual they abused was an automated process, and just because the practitioner is gone, it'll still remain active a while longer. There's still a danger of monsters being born in this town, so I'm carrying on my subjugation mission. Ah, yes. Of course I'm taking about Kuria's Grand

Adventure.”

According to Kagurai-senpai,

“I have to keep hunting buggles, and chasing after ‘Reloader’. I thought I had finally managed to take in an executive the other day, but that was apparently a fake. ‘Gyahahaha! How lame, making that big report to the big house and embarrassing yourself’ P-pipe down Gakuta! Keep quiet a minute! Well, anyways, I’ll have to stay in this era a while longer. ‘So we’ll be counting on you, brat!’ I told you to shut it! Eh? Yeah. That’s the dream I saw yesterday, of course.”

How should I put it, the three of them were the same as ever.

“Good morning Orino-san. Wait, ah, that’s...”

Early morning, three days after the incident (?), I ran into Orino-san at the school gate and was shocked. Orino-san’s head was wrapped with the white stomach wrap I gave her.

“Oh this?” she pat her own head. “Turns out it wasn’t a stomach wrap, it was a hair band.”

“No way!”

I went and did it I was taken by the design at first sight, and never really checked it.

“Uwah... I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I actually prefer it this way. Does it look good on me?”

“Perfect.”

When I honestly praised her, “Fufu,” she happily gave a childish laugh. “Then let’s hurry up. I’m sure Kagurai-senpai and Kurisu-chan are waiting.”

Quite right, I nodded.

Today, Kagurai-senpai’s class would have classics, and Kurisu-chan’s class geography, they each had their own quizzes, so in order to study not through the night but the morning, Orino-san and I were called to the school.

The academic prowess of those two wasn’t rising in the slightest, so it didn’t feel worth it to teach.

Even so. Kagurai Monyumi, Kurisu Crimson Kuria, Orino Shiori.

I got the feeling no matter how I thanked them, it would never be enough. If they were troubled, I wanted to put in as much effort as I could.

“I was proposed to the other day.”

A shocker from Orino-san half-way up the stairs.

“Eh!? B-by who?”

“Who knows. I wonder. Fufufu.”

She laughed it off as a joke. Could it be she was teasing me?
When it comes to proposal, I also did that once, around ten years ago.

“Hey, about that tale of first love you mentioned last time, would you tell me about it? Remember, that girl you met in that Gentle Breeze Park?”

She seemed to really be looking forward to my answer. I got a malicious sense, as if she was intentionally asking a question she already knew the answer to, but that was just my perception acting up.

“When I was around second, I was playing in the park, when a lady in a strange suit fell into the sandbox. We talked about some things.”

“Yeah.”

“She was a really pretty, kind-looking lady. It was love at first sight.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Though the tall lady who came after her was prettier and had a better body.”

“...”

A crack ran through Orino-san’s bright smiling face.

“H-huh? What’s wrong, Orino-san?”

[IMAGE]

“... In the end, it looks like I’m no match for Kagurai-senpai...”

“Eh? Why is Kagurai-senpai coming up?”

“Shut it! Kagoshima-kun, you idiot!”

She yelled at me with red cheeks, before swiftly ascending the stairs without me. Her steps were light, like a psychic who had undergone combat training.

“I wonder what’s wrong with Orino-san...?”

I started climbing alone.

We were still in the middle of the conversation. “The lady who came after her was prettier and had a better body, but I seriously fell in love with the first lady,” was what I was supposed to say.

It was already a tale ten years old, I could only faintly recall her face.

“Mn? Face?”

Come to think of it, maybe that lady looked a little like Orino-san.

“... Well, I’m sure it’s my imagination.”

Who knows?

If I don’t hurry up, I’ll be late to the study meet. I picked up my pace.

You’ve got to enjoy life.

In this boring world we live, where heroes of justice don’t exist.

Even if, hypothetically, there were a heroes doing their best in the world’s backstage, I could only find satisfaction in the peaceful boredom they created.

Because I’m sure.

That’s the hero of justice’s wish.

Postscript

No, just notice already!

This work was written with that feeling at the base.

A sub character who doesn't notice the identity of the fighting protagonists spots them around here and there. All the protagonists manage to skillfully play it off.

From time to time, they play it off in a, no wait, that's really pushing it, kind of way, but even so, the sub character does not notice. It was pretty much what you'd expect.

And then it hit me.

"What if that non-noticing sub character was actually the protagonist...?"

And well, one thing led to another.

So with this and that, it's a pleasure to meet you, I'm Nozomi Kota. This is my debut work.

I didn't read a single novel throughout elementary, middle or high school and had my mother write all my summer break book reports, so why am I even here... there's no telling where you'll end up in life.

I give my thanks to the following

When I can't shake off the feeling of being a student (wait, I still am), my editor who put up with me and gave me all sorts of advice. Takatsuki Ichi-sama for drawing all the gorgeous illustrations in this work. Everyone who awarded me the 5th Japon Grand Prize. I am truly thankful. It's all thanks to you that this book was safely sent out into the world.

All you readers who took up this book, where I'm not really sure if a boy meets girl or not, have my deepest gratitude.

Ah, by the way, I plan to put out a book with GA Bunko in September.

(TL: Referring to Happy Death Day)

It's a work that received the award of excellence in the 3rd GA Bunko Grand Prix. Go ahead and give it a read if you want. In 'I Really Don't Notice', I've completely changed my writing style, so I'd be happy if you puzzled over, "Was

this really written by the same person?”

Well then, if the chance arises, let’s meet again.

-Nozomi Kota